

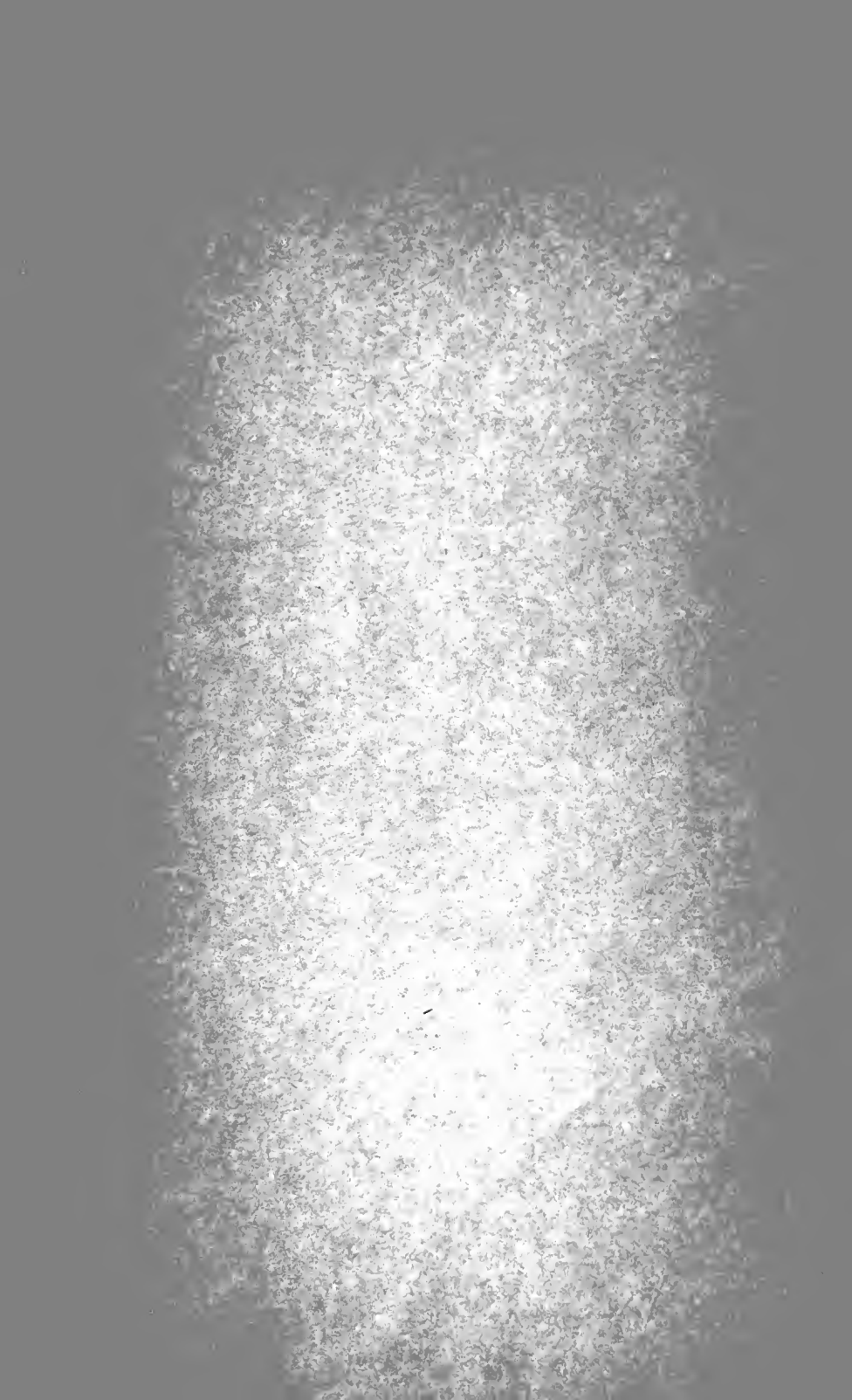
AA0005996038



PR4331  
N5



LIBRARY  
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE





Nichol, John  
"

ROBERT BURNS

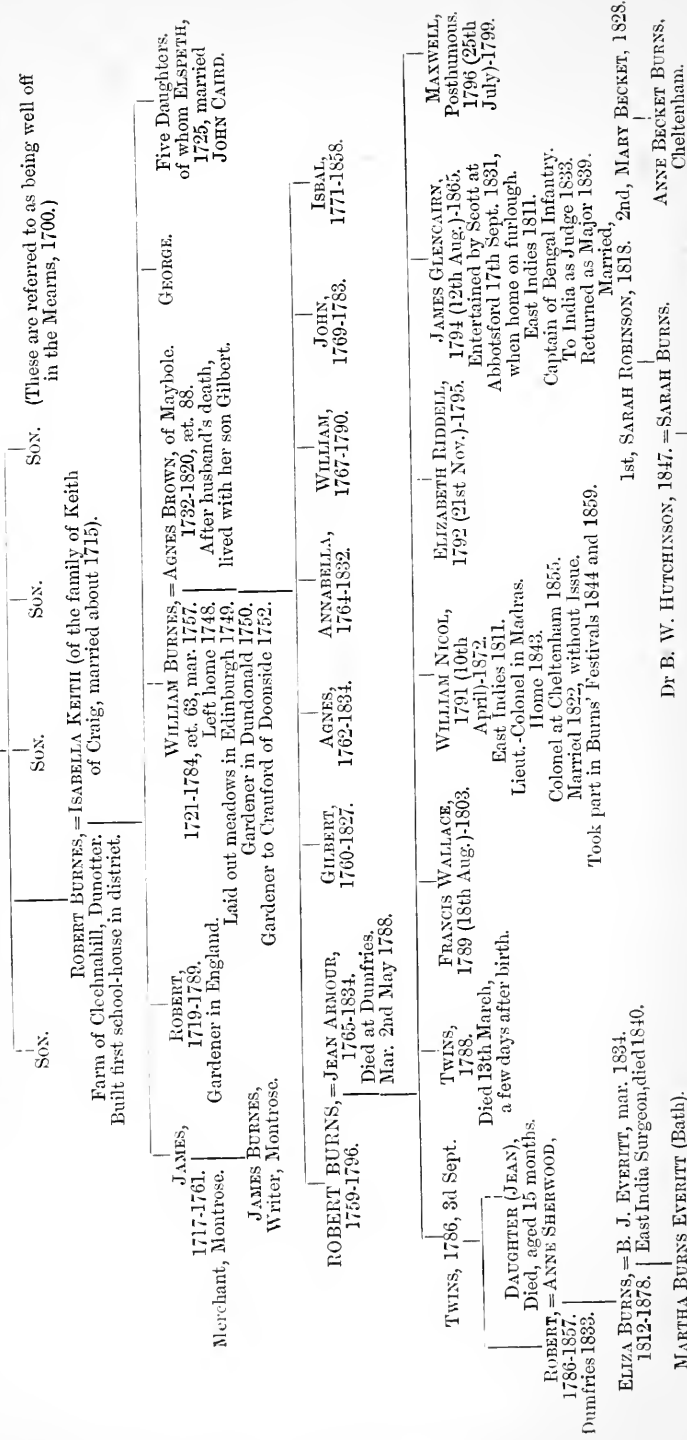
a summary of his career and genius

Edinburgh; W. Paterson

1882

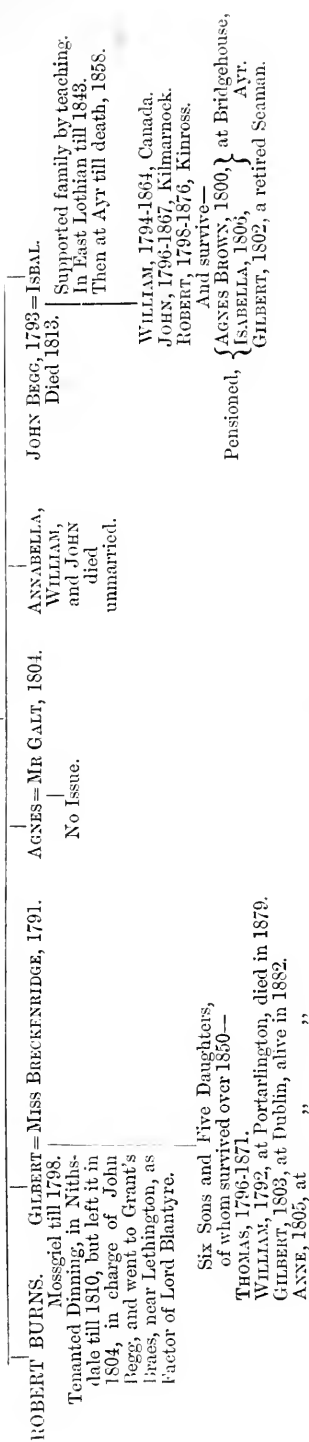
# THE BURNS FAMILY.

JAMES BURNES, \* = MARGARET FALCONER,  
Bralinnuir, Glenbervie, Died 1743, æt. 87. | Died 1749, æt. 90.

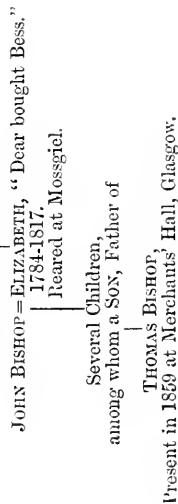


\* The relation of this James Burnes to Robert of Clochnahill is not absolutely demonstrated; but see Vol. IV., p. 2.

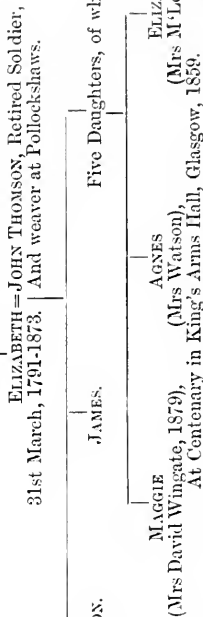
WILLIAM BURNS=AGNES BROWN.



1. Bv ELIZABETH PATON,



22. BY ANN PARK, of Globe Tavern, Dumfries.



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2008 with funding from  
Microsoft Corporation



# ROBERT BURNS.

## A SUMMARY OF HIS CAREER AND GENIUS.

---

“They say best men are moulded out of faults,  
And, for the most, become much more the better  
For being a little bad.”

—*Measure for Measure*, Act v. Scene 1.

“Salve vetustæ vitæ imago

Et specimen venientis Ævi.”—G. BUCHANAN.

### I.—INTRODUCTORY.

IN a bibliography, scarcely inferior in variety to that which has gathered around Shakespeare, there is a tract with the heading, “Men who have failed.” Its purpose is apparent; we can construct the sermon from the text, as Cuvier reconstructed a monster from the inspection of a bone: but the title, as applied, is false. Whatever Burns’s merits or demerits as a man, the vital part of his career was a swift success, and, what is of more moment, a lasting. Every decade in which his presence recedes his power grows: his passionate strength has overleapt the barriers of his dialect. Almost every British critic, during the last half century, has pelted or hailed him: everything that should be said of him, and everything that should not, has been said, often clumsily, often disconnectedly, yet on the whole exhaustively; so that little remains but to correct conflicting exaggerations. Burns has suffered from two sets of assailants. The “unco guid,” who “compound for” social meanness and religious malice, by

damning other things "they have no mind to," had a score against him, which, during his life and after, they did their best to pay: and they believed him to be worse than he was because they wished it. The "unco" bad were keen to exaggerate his weakness, that they might throw over their own vulgar vices the shield of his great name. On the other hand, the idolatry of a nation, prone to canonise its illustrious dead, has oppositely erred. "No poet, from the blind singer of Troy downwards, is his peer;" "What would become of the civilised world were his writings obliterated?"—such are the common-places of festival speeches, of journalists patriotically inspired. He has been worshipped, shouted about, preached at, pointed to as a warning, held forth as an example. "The roar of his drunkards" has proclaimed him a saint; the grim moralist, to the zealot's joy, has denounced him as the chief of sinners. It is as natural as harmless that a recent accomplished biographer, selected on the Heraclitean principle of contrasts, should sigh over his "Socinian tendencies," and daintily regret the publication of his quenchless satires: it is inevitable that a literary censor, whose writings are sometimes models of style always mirrors of complacency, should label his wood-notes as hardly superfine. He has had plenty of praise, plenty of blame, enough of "allowances," far more than enough of patronage: he has rarely had—what few men have often—simple justice.

"The work of Burns," says his first editor, "may be considered as a monument not to his own name only but to the expiring genius of an ancient and independent nation." The antithesis of our chief latinist better represents the attitude of our chief poet, who was at once the last of the old and the first of the new. He came in the autumn or evening of our northern literature, but around him was the freshness of the morning and the May. Like Chaucer, he stood on the edge of two eras, and was a prophet as well as a recorder, embalming and exalting legend and song, affronting and rending inveterate superstitions; the satirist as well as the lyrist of his race. A Jacobite and a Jacobin, holding

out hands to Charlie over the straits and to Washington across the Atlantic, the monument of his verse "*vetustæ vitæ imago*" bears a beacon "*venientis ævi*." Pupil of Ramsay, master of Tannahill, it is natural that Chloris and Damon should linger in his pages beside Jean and Gavin and Davie, and the beggars at Nanse's splore. Everyone of judgment sees that his most underived and passionate work was his best, that his fame rests most firmly on the records of his wildest or freest moods; more on the Songs and the Satires and Tam O'Shanter and the Cantata than on the "Cottar's Saturday Night." But to realise his relation to the thought and music of his country requires a study of his antecedents. Our space confines us to a brief statement of his historical position and an exhibition of his character in a summary of his life.

Burns was an educated, but not a learned man, and he drew next to nothing from our early literature. Of the old Ballads, despite his residence in the border land, he made comparatively little use. The seventeenth century had little to give him; when the strife of Covenanter and Cavalier held the hearts and threatened the lives of men, the northern Muses were dumb. Poetry was shrivelled under the frown of Presbyteries. The stream of native song had been flowing, under black weeds, till it came to light again in the Jacobite minstrelsy,—where the spirit of the hills first makes itself felt in the voices of the plain,—in the pastorals of Ramsay, the fresh canvass of Thomson and Beattie, and the sketches of native life by Fergusson. From these, his generously acknowledged masters, Burns inherited much; most from the ill-starred genius of the last. The loves, animosities, and temptations of the two poets were akin; they were both, almost to boasting, devotees of independence; both keen patriots, they were alike inspired with a livid hate of their country's besetting sin, hypocrisy; but there is, on a smaller scale, the same difference between them that there is between Chaucer and Shakespeare. "The Farmer's Ingle" is a quaint picture of a rustic fireside north of the Tweed, but "The Cottar" is a store of household words

for every Scottish home in the nineteenth century; "Plain-staines and Causey" prattle, with playful humour, of the freaks and follies of the society that moves over them; but about the bridges that span the Doon there is thrown the moonlight of the fairies of the "Midsummer Night." In greater measure, Burns was the heir of the nameless minstrels, on whose ungraven tombs he throws a wreath of laurels wet with grateful tears. But he likewise exalts them, idealising their plain-spoken pathos or laughter, making their local interests universal and abiding.

He was enabled to do so by the fact of his being inspired by the spirit of the Future as well as of the Past. He lived when the so-called "Romantic" literary movement had been initiated by the publication of Percy's *Reliques*, Macpherson's *Ossian*, and the immortal forgeries of the most precocious genius in our tongue. Burns never names Chatterton,—probably because he could not read his masterpieces,—but they have many points of contact. Both were emphatically Bards, as opposed to the poets of culture by whom they were, in the eighteenth century, almost exclusively preceded; both were "sleepless souls," but their themes lay far apart. The mysteriously stranded child to whose dingy garret there came visions of armies in the air, the flapping of ravens' wings, the sound of seas in a tumult like that of Kubla Khan, is the ancestor of Coleridge on his magic side: Burns, of Wordsworth, to whom he bequeathed his pathetic interpretation of nature; and of Byron, the inheritor of his "passions wild and strong." They are together petrels of the storm that, shaking "thrones, pryncedoms, powers, dominions," converted Versailles into a moral Pompeii, and drove the classic canons of art into a museum of antiquities. The "Freedom dreste in blodde steyned veste" of the one is like the "stalwart ghaist" with the "sacred-poesie-Libertie" of the other. But if the Rowley poems had any influence on Burns, it came indirectly through Cowper, who may have borrowed the Olney Hymn, "God moves in a mysterious way," from Chatterton's, beginning "O God, whose thunder shakes the

sky," and handed on the same devotional mood to the author of the prayer—

“ O thou Great Being what Thou art  
Surpasses me to know.”

The same breath blows through diverse instruments that have, as regards religion, the same note of scorn for insincerity, and beneath it one major key of perplexity, awe, and resignation. The defiance that rises in Queen Mab and the Revolt of Islam, almost to the shrillness of a shriek, the lurid light of the red star of Cain, belong to a later age.

William Cowper—a reed shaken with the wind, and yet a prophet—a terror-stricken “castaway,” and yet the most conspicuous leader of a revolt, found in Scotland a vicegerent greater than himself,—a mighty mass of manhood, who, free from the intellectual fetters that bound, the ghastly clouds that obscured his elder contemporary, struck more ringing blows, and soared into a higher heaven.

Finally—*pace* Mr Carlyle to the contrary—the condition of our literature at the time was, on the whole, favourable to the appearance of our greatest interpreter. It has been the fashion to talk contemptuously of the men who, though with different ideas of finish, reared many of the foundations upon which we build; but, if we except Poetry and Physical Science, the eighteenth century produced most of what the nineteenth is content to criticise. “In its latter half,” says Mr Charles Scott in a paper displaying rare insight and sympathy, “Scotland was at the culmination of its intellectual glory. It never stood higher relatively to the rest of Europe.” After supporting his assertion by the names of Hume, Robertson, Reid, Stewart, and Adam Smith, he proceeds, “The Bench, the Bar, and the Pulpit were adorned by men who, sometimes rough and quaint, were always vigorous and original. We had in those days the greatest statesmen Britain has seen . . . the approach of the French Revolution had stirred the blood of the people . . . their great poet alone was wanting. The hour struck and the man appeared.”

## II.—SURVEY OF BURNS' LIFE.

I.—*First Period, Alloway, 1759—1766. (Æt. 1-7.)*

Burns was qualified to be a national poet by his start from the meeting of all the waters of his country's literature, no less so by the circumstances of his birth and the grasp of his genius. Seion of a family on the North-East, members of which, by his own account, had shared the fortunes of the Earl of Mar, he was born and lived in the South-West among the descendants of the Covenanters. He was a peasant more in virtue of his prevailing themes than by his actual rank. Addressing every grade from the Prince of Wales to roadside tramps, the "annals of the poor" are dearest to the heart of one who was often by painful experience familiar with their sorrows. But Burns himself, save latterly as a government official, never did a day's work for others than himself and his family. His father's status as a tenant farmer in the Lowlands was equivalent to that of an English yeoman. His own position in society, in the lower section of the middle class, went with his education and his free spirit to make him as much at ease in the reception rooms of the aristocracy as in the lanes of Mauchline. Everything conspired to make him what he was, a national rather than a peasant poet. In one of the passages in which he almost petulantly resents the claims of rank, he speaks of his "ancient but ignoble blood." In the same spirit Beranger, answering those who "criticise the paltry de" before his name, rejoices in being "a very scamp of common stamp." But both were only half in earnest, and neither without some pride in their ancestors. Those of Burns can be traced at least to the later years of the seventeenth century, when they are found well settled in the Mearns. It is worthy of note that the poet's grandfather, inspired by a zeal which characterised his descendants, built the first school-house in the district of his farm. His third son, William, born in 1721, continued to reside in Kincardineshire till 1748, when he migrated southwards as a gardener; in 1749 laying

out the Edinburgh meadows, and from 1750 onwards similarly engaged in Ayrshire, till, having taken a lease of seven acres in Alloway, he built on them, largely with his own hands, the "auld clay biggin" of two rooms, to which, in 1757, at the age of thirty-six, he brought home his bride, Agnes Brown of Maybole. In this house—now almost a Mecca to northern patriots—Robert, the first offspring of the marriage, was born on the 25th January 1759.

For the little record left of the cottage life at Alloway, we are indebted to three sometimes conflicting authorities:—Burns' letter (vol. iv. 4-20) to Dr Moore (Aug. 1787); that addressed to Mrs Dunlop by his brother Gilbert; and the reminiscences of his tutor, Mr John Murdoch, a young man of rare accomplishments and sagacity, to whom during their childhood, and much to their profit, the education of the family was in large measure committed. The autobiographic sketch is a strange chequer of fancy, philosophy, and recklessness, written in the sunshine of success, crossed by the shade of afflictions and of follies, which the writer was simultaneously deploring and recommitting. It is written with great apparent candour, and with the author's constant force of style; the facts, often lighted up by brilliancies of setting, are sometimes, it may be, magnified in the haze of imagination. From the blessing or bane of the excess of this faculty, Gilbert—the only other junior member of the family who in a rapid sketch calls for comment—was, in his maturity at least, singularly free. An intelligent and canny Scot of enlarged mind, he is studiously proper, respectable, and orthodox, speaking in one strain of "an atheist, a demagogue, or any vile thing." He is a more or less sympathetic apologist for his brother's weaknesses; but, in the interests of truth or of popular feeling, he more than once attempts to disenchant Robert's narrative of an element of romance. *E.g.* The poet attributes the family migration southward to political causes, describing his ancestors as "renting lands of the noble Keiths of Marischal," as having had "the honour of sharing their fate" and "shaking hands with ruin for what they

esteemed the cause of their King and their country." Elsewhere the same assertion reappears in verse :—

"My fathers that name have revered on a throne,  
My fathers have fallen to right it ;  
Those fathers would spurn their degenerate son,  
That name should he scoffingly slight it."

Gilbert, on the alleged authority of a parish certificate, emphatically asserts that his father had "no concern in the late wicked rebellion." Between the romance of the elder and the caution of the younger brother we have, in this instance, no means of deciding. A variation of more interest appears in their diverse estimates of the character of William Burness himself. There is nothing in the poet's prose inconsistent either with the picture of the Cottar, or the noble epitaph ending with Goldsmith's line—"For e'en his failings leaned to Virtue's side." But of these failings Robert was far from being piously unconscious. "I have met with few," he says of his father, "who understood men, their manners and their ways, equal to him ; but stubborn ungainly integrity and headlong ungovernable irascibility are disqualifying circumstances, consequently I was born a very poor man's son." Elsewhere he complains of being the victim of parental prejudice. Gilbert, on the other hand, always defends his father, saying, "I bless his character for almost everything in my disposition or habits I can approve." "He was proud of Robert's genius, but the latter was not amenable to controul," which indeed appears to have been the fact. Genius seldom is amenable to control : the same applies to dense stupidity. Murdoch, writing from London in later years, is lavish in expressions of love and veneration for his old employer, in whose two-roomed cottage, a "tabernacle of clay, there dwelt a larger portion of content than in any palace in Europe." "He spoke the English language with more propriety than any man I ever knew with no greater advantages. This had a very good effect on the boys, who talked and reasoned like men long before others. O for a world of such . . . he was worthy of a place in Westminster Abbey." Allowing for the exaggerations of filial piety and tutorial gratitude, we



gather that William Burness was, on the whole, as Mr Carlyle describes him, a man worth going far to meet, of that force of character which rises into originality, with a thirst for knowledge and power of communicating it alike remarkable, but defective in tact; none farther from Macklin's Scotchman, for instead of "booing" he was ostentatiously independent, manly to the core, and religious, with a softened Calvinism, expressed in his *Manual of Belief* (*vide* vol. iv. 341, and *seq.*), fond of speculation, within limits, and keen in argument. In person he was above common stature, thin and bent; in essence honesty incarnate. The secret of Scotland's greatness, says the *Times*, is oatmeal; a notorious champion of the Free Church says it is Sabbatarianism; a zealous Presbyterian, that it is hatred of Prelacy. Does it not rely as much on the influence of a few men of such character as we have described? Murdoch's remaining recollections of the quiet household, of the father who bequeathed his proud, quick temper without the strong controlling will, of the mother from whom Robert inherited his bright eyes and love of song, of the precocious boys, the gravity of the future poet, and the gaiety of the douce farmer, of the early love of books, and the integrity common to them all, are our only reliable records of the life at Alloway, unless we refer to this period the "warlock and spunkie" stories of the old woman,—germs of the fancies that afterwards conjured up an eerie "something" on the Tarbolton road, and set the ruined kirk "ableeze" with the most wonderful witch dance in literature.

II.—*Second Period, Mount Oliphant, 1766 — 1777.*  
(*Æt.* 7-18.)

The happiest days of William Burness went by in the clay cottage. Henceforth, as before, he wrought hard, and practised, as he preached, economy, temperance, and perseverance, but the winds and tides of adversity were ruthless, and he played a losing game. Desirous of cultivating land on his own account, he obtained a lease of Mount Oliphant in 1765, and entered on residence in the following year. The

sad story of the bad farm,—“with the poorest soil under cultivation,” writes Gilbert in 1800,—of the scanty crops, the inclement seasons, the death of the kind landlord, and the insolent letters of the tyrannic factor has been often told, best of all by Burns himself, whose character was, during these twelve years, largely formed under influences partly favourable, partly the reverse. At home the children continued to be trained up “in decency and order” by their father, who, with two exceptions—Robert’s fortnightly study of French under Murdoch at Ayr, and some lessons in penmanship at Dalrymple—took upon himself the whole duty of their education. This was conducted by candlelight in the evenings when they had returned from their labour in the fields, special attention being paid to arithmetic as a secular, and exposition of the Scriptures as a religious basis. To these lessons was added the stimulating effect of the “good talk” in leisure hours with the few clever people of the neighbourhood—Mrs Burns, though much occupied with household matters, listening appreciatively—and the reading aloud of some play of Shakespeare or other classic. Books were William Burness’ only luxury; he never ranked a love of them among the artificial wants he strove to discourage, and his well-chosen stock, acquired by the scant savings of the family or placed at their disposal by the kindness of friends, was at starting the poet’s greatest advantage. His earliest favourites were the “Vision of Mirza” and one of Addison’s Hymns. Then followed the life of Hannibal, lent by Murdoch, and the history of Sir William Wallace, some years after borrowed from a village blacksmith. The first sent the boy strutting up and down the room in an excess of martial enthusiasm that was far from being one of the man’s prevailing moods, breaking out genuinely in only three of his later songs. The second, doubtless the popular chap-book based on Blind Harry, poured into his veins the “Scotch prejudice” to which he owes so much of his hold over the somewhat self-sufficient race of which he is at once the censor and the trumpeter. Burns was born as Scott was born, before the age of the shrivelling criticism—“the spirit that says ‘No’”—that

has robbed us of Coriolanus and Tell, and damped half the fires of national fervour. "The greatest of the Plantagenets" was to him a bogie tyrant; the firer of the Barns of Ayr, a model of martyred chivalry; and in singleness of heart he chose a fine Sunday to worship in the Leglen Wood, visiting the fabled haunts of his "heroic countryman with as much devout enthusiasm as ever pilgrim did the shrine of Loretto." Among other volumes, borrowed or bought, on the shelves of Loan House were, besides good manuals and grammars of English and French (in which language he displayed remarkable proficiency), Mason's Extracts, a collection of songs, Stackhouse's History of the Bible, from which Burns picked up a fair amount of ancient history, a set of Queen Anne letters, on the study of which he began to write his own carefully and to keep copies of them, the Spectator, Pope's Homer and afterwards his other works, some of the novels of Richardson and Smollet, Ramsay, Hervey, with some plays of Shakespeare and essays of Locke. To these were added at Lochlea, Shenstone, Thomson, Fergusson, Mackenzie's "Man of Feeling," Tristram Shandy—which he devoured at meals, spoon in hand—with the Mirror, Lounger, &c., and later Macpherson's "Ossian" and Milton. A good library for a farm house even now, and, if scant as that of an author, Burns had mastered it. He drew blood from everything he read, *e.g.*, the style of some of his letters is affected by Sterne to a degree never enough remarked, that of others equally by the English essayists. Above all, he was saturated with the Bible and the Book of Songs, carrying them with him for spare moments in the fields, and lingering over them in his cold little room by night; "carefully noting the true, tender, sublime, or fustian," and so learning to be a critic, while stirred by emulation to become himself a lyricist. His first verses were inspired by a calf love—inno-cent prelude to many of various hues—for "Handsome Nell," his partner in the labours of the harvest during his fifteenth autumn, the tones of whose voice made his "heart strings thrill like an Æolian harp." Save the song, "I dreamed I lay where flowers were springing," he wrote

nothing more of consequence till six, and little till ten years later. His circumstances were fatal to precocious authorship. The father and sons were fighting bravely through their eleven lean years of struggle, ending in defeat; and were, with both physical and moral bad results, overwrought. Work on land, in the open air, is in itself more favourable to mental activity than the routine drudgery of a teacher or literary hack; but the labour to which the young Burnsese were inevitably subjected was both excessive and premature. The poet was always a good and dexterous workman, "at the plough, scythe, or reap-hook he feared no competitor:" in the later days at Ellisland we have testimony to his being able at a push to "heave a heavier stone" than any of his "hands." But these early efforts were drawing on his capital and exhausting his fund of strength. At the age of thirteen he threshed the corn.

"The thresher's weary flinging tree  
The lea lang day had wearied me."

At fifteen he was the principal labourer. The family kept no servant, and for several years butcher-meat was unknown in the house. Unceasing toil brought Burns to his sixteenth year. His robust frame overtaken, his patience was overtried; despite bursts of buoyancy and the vague ambition which he pathetically compares to the groping of the blind Cyclops, his temper was often exasperated. His shoulders were bowed, and his nervous system received a fatal strain; hence long, dull headaches, palpitations and sullen fits of hypochondria, with lurid lights from "the passionate heart," darting at intervals through the cloud. "*Μελαγχρόλικοι άει εν σφοδρα ύρεξει.*" Prosperity has its temptations, but they are nothing to those of the poetic temperament goaded by pain within, and chilled by apathy without. From toils which he associates with those of a galley slave, and the internal fire craving for sympathy in a freer atmosphere than even that of his home, there sprung the spirit of revolt which soon made headway, and passed not only the bars of formalism, but the limits of rational self-restraint.

At this period, despite an awkward shyness and a morbid dread of ridicule, the poet's social disposition—"the hypochondriac taint" he calls it, that made him fly solitude—had led him to form acquaintance with companions in or near Ayr, some of whom had superior advantages, contemplated not without envy. "They did not know," he bitterly remarks, "enough of the world to insult the clouterly appearance of his plough-boy carcase." Two years after he had committed his first "sin of rhyme," Burns, if we accept his own chronology, spent the summer months at Kirkoswald, studying mensuration. Here he came in contact with some of the riotous scenes of that smuggling coast, took part in them, found himself "no enemy to social life," and learned "to look unconcernedly on a large tavern bill." Here also, when "the sun entered Virgo" (*i.e.*, in August) he encountered a premonition of his master spell in "a charming fillette," who, living next door to the school, set him "off at a tangent" from his trigonometry. Nothing came of the affair at the time, but several years later (1783) Burns renewed his acquaintance with the girl (Peggy Thomson), and from a rough former draft rewrote in her honour, "Now westlin' winds," etc. Following the same authority (his own) as to date, we must assign to the early winter of the same year an event by which the serenity of the domestic life—one phase of which is represented in the "Cottar's Saturday Night," the other in the "Twa Dogs"—was interrupted. This event was the poet's persistence, directly against his father's will, in attending a country dancing-school. The motive he assigns, a desire to give his manners a "brush," seems innocent enough; but the action was typical of his rebellion against the straiter rules of the Scotch moral creed, and is therefore of more importance than at first appears.

It is admitted that, in reaction from the levities of later Romanism, the reformed religion in the north was at first stamped with an excessive austerity, and that, in after days, the long fight of Presbyterian Calvinism with the Episcopalian Hierarchy helped to perpetuate the spirit in which Knox himself, though by no means so fanatical as many of

his followers, regarded a ball at Holyrood as "the dance of the seven deadly sins." The overstrained moral code of the Puritans, laughed out by the Restoration, discarded as visionary by the common sense of the Revolution in England, survived in Scotland in connection with the penances of the Kirk, so familiar to the reader of Burns, and still lingers in police regulations more socially inquisitorial than those of any other civilized country. The attempt to "deal with" every form of human frailty as a legal offence may be laudable in design; in practice it is apt to generate hypocrisy, deceit, and even crime, as a means of escape from exposure. But the stricter party of the Scotch Kirk, during the eighteenth century, not content with publicly branding the sins, set its face against the amusements of the people; it tried to keep them not only sober and chaste, but constantly sombre, to close the theatres, to shut the barns, fine the fiddlers, and set their melodies to psalms. Under the most depressing circumstances, Nature will have her way. From the gloom of a stern creed within, of inclement skies without, the Scotch peasantry sought relief in vocal music, cultivated the more eagerly that instrumental was banished from the kirks, in whisky, and in dancing. The Reformation for two centuries in our country stifled the other arts, but not that of Rizzio. Music triumphed over the spirit of the creed of Calvin, as it is now encroaching on the precepts of Penn. The fire in the heart of the Scotch peasantry, unextinguished by all the dry ashes of the Catechism, found vent in love songs—many of those current before the coming of their great minstrel, of worse than doubtful taste—in which they are tenfold more prolific than the gayer French; in rural assignations, where passion too often set at nought the terrors of the cutty-stool, and in the village "splore," for which the dancing-school was a preparation. "This is," says Dr Currie, in his liveliest passage, worth quoting as a comment on many of our author's poems, "usually a barn in winter, and the arena for the performers a clay floor. The dome is lighted by candles stuck in one end of a cloven stick, the other being thrust into the wall. Young men and

women will walk many miles to these country schools, and the instant the violin sounds, fatigue seems to vanish, the toil-worn rustic becomes erect, his features brighten with sympathy, every nerve seems to thrill with sensation, and every artery to vibrate with life." Such was the scene from which William Burness wished to keep back the poet, and from which the poet would not be kept back. It is a wise thing to multiply innocent pleasures, the worst policy to restrict them. Unfortunately in seeking an innocent pleasure, Burns was made guilty of a disobedience, and resented it by a defiance inevitable to his nature. In taking his first step to be the interpreter of a nation, he had to cease to be a dutiful son. He broke the bonds that would not stretch, and soon revelled in his freedom as a wild colt in a meadow. From this crisis, he began to find himself; his virgin bashfulness was too rapidly "brushed" away; his native eloquence gushed forth like a liberated stream; in every society he found himself the light of conversation and the leader of debate; and in his hours of leisure beyond the walls of his home, whether by a dyke-side or in an inn parlour, was surrounded by admiring or astonished groups who confided to him their affairs of the heart, and obtained his assistance in their wooing. At this period, ere reaching "green eighteen," he himself began to manifest a precocious "penchant á l'adorable moitié du genre humain"—"My heart was completely tinder, and was eternally lighted up by some goddess or other." According to Gilbert, Robert "idealized his women perpetually:" but he was as fickle as Sterne, and through life found it easier to adore a new mistress than to put on a new coat: a versatility often characteristic of the poetic temperament.

### III.—*Third Period, Lochlea, 1777 — 1784. (Æt. 18-25.)*

William Burness attempted to leave Mount Oliphant at the end of a six years lease, *i.e.*, after a residence of five and a-half years, 1771; but, failing, remained five and a-half years longer, at the expiration of which he contrived to

reserve means and credit to secure the tenancy of Lochlea, whither the family removed on Whitsunday 1777, and where, for the first three years of their occupancy, they seem to have fairly thriven. Of this space of time there is little record: to its close belong the poet's letters to Ellison Begbie—a young woman, understood to be the Mary Morrison of his song, to whom he paid his addresses with a view to marriage, but who, after seriously entertaining them, to his grave discomfiture, rejected his suit. In 1780 the brothers established a Bachelors' Club, in which a variety of social subjects were discussed, though under some restrictions, with sufficient freedom and zest to stimulate the ingenuity and sharpen the wits of the members. It appears that Robert, always ambitious of shining, prepared himself beforehand for the debates. The next year of his life was in more than one respect disastrous. Having been in the habit of raising flax on a portion of his father's ground, it occurred to him to go to Irvine to learn to dress it. For some time he attacked his new trade with heart and hope, and, if we may judge by the letter to his father of Dec. 1781, lived a strictly frugal and abstinent life: but as they were giving a welcome carousal to the New-Year (1782), the shop, in which he had combined with one of his mother's relations, took fire, and Burns was left "like a true poet, without a sixpence." Smarting under this loss, feeling himself jilted at once by Ellison and by fortune, he went through the usual despairs, and resorted to the too common consolations. Meeting with others of the class of seafaring men he had encountered at Kirkoswald, his eloquence, raised to a feverish heat, shed a lustre over their wild thoughts and ways. By one of those, a Mr Richard Brown, whose romantic adventures captivated his fancy, he was now for the first time—by how many not the last were hard to tell—led to "bound across the strid" of what is technically called virtue. We have here no space, had we inclination, to pry into the details of the story, nor the continual repetitions of it, which marked and marred his career. Home again with a troubled conscience, and a love



for company unworthy of him, he found in the Masonic Lodge at Tarbolton an institution unhappily well-suited to his weakness for being first in every circle. In the festivals of that guild he could defy competition: the brethren, justly proud of their new deputy-master, joined with a right good will in the ballad of John Barleycorn, and shouted till "the kebars sheuk" over the chorus of "The Big-bellied Bottle." Nevertheless these years were not barren. Before going to Irvine, Burns had written "Ye Cessnock Banks" and "My Nannie O:" he brought back from it his early religious pieces, and the volume of Fergusson which first fired him with the definite ambition of being himself a poet.

Between 1781-83 were written the "Lament for Mailie," "Winter: a Dirge," "Remorse," and others in similar strain; also a number of songs, the best known being "The Rigs of Barley" and "Green grow the rushes." These were addressed to various objects; some former flames, as Kirkoswald Peggy, again flit across the horizon, others may have been imaginary. One might as well undertake to trace all the originals of Horace's or Herrick's fancy as those of Burns', for, when he became famous, even married women contended to have sat to him for their portraits. The passion in these songs is more lively than intense, their charm is in the field breeze that blows through them as freshly as in the days of Chaucer. A love for the lower forms of social life was the poet's besetting sin,—Nature his healing power. He was fortunate in being placed amid the scenes best suited to nourish a genius which fed on the meadows and glades round the bends of the Ayr, as a bee feeds on flowers, and had no affinity to mountain tops on the one hand, or to cities on the other. Living in full face of the Arran hills, he never names them. He takes refuge from the ridges of Ben Gail and Ben Gnuiss among the woods of Ballochmyle, and in the spirit which inspired his "Mouse" and his "Daisy," turns out of his path, fearing to "disturb the little songsters of the grove." Similarly Chaucer, who travelled in Italy, names neither

Alp nor Apennine. Each found his "cheer in the brightness utterly of the glad sun." The gloom of Burns was not by lonely tarn or "steep frowning summit," but in the snow-drift that starves the cattle on the lowland moor, and the winter wind that is like man's ingratitude. A country life saved him as far as he was saved; two seasons of a city made it stale to him, and he perished in a county town. With the sweetness of the fields came the benign influences of Coila, to which he thus refers:—"My passions, when once lighted up, raged like so many devils, till they got vent in rhyme, and then the conning over my verses, like a spell, soothed all into quiet." Here the lyrist of the last century anticipates the great mosaic-worker of the present—

"But for the unquiet heart and brain  
A use in measured language lies,  
The sad mechanic exercise,  
Like dull narcotics numbing pain."

In 1783 the poet, beginning to realise the chances of his fame, commenced his first Common-Place Book, "Observations, hints, songs, scraps of poetry, &c"—it concludes October 1785, with a warning against his own errors (æt. 24-26). The second, begun April 9, 1787, ends August 1790 (æt. 28-31). They are both of considerable biographical and literary interest.

Meanwhile at the farm affairs were kept going only by strict economy and hard labour, and when a dispute about the terms of the lease resulted in an adverse decision it broke the old man's heart. He died (Feb. 13, 1784, æt. 63) full of sorrows and apprehensions for the gifted son, who wrote for his tomb in Alloway the famous epitaph, and afterwards applied to him the lines of Beattie—

"Is it for this fair virtue oft must strive  
With disappointment, penury, and pain?"

Robert and Gilbert lingered at Lochlea for some time longer, but, when the crash came, they were only able, by claiming arrears of wages on their father's estate, to rescue enough to start in joint-tenancy at Mossgiel, about a mile

from Mauchline, whither, about Whitsunday, they migrated with their mother and the rest of the family.

IV.—*Fourth Period, Mossiel, 1784 — 1788. (Æt. 25-29.)*

The brothers entered on their new lease with brave hearts, Robert, in a resolute mood, calculating crops, attending markets, and determined, "in spite of the world, the flesh, and the devil, to be a wise man," but the results of bad seed the first year, and a late harvest the second, "overset" his "wisdom." The family seemed to flit from one mound in Ayrshire to another: their new abode also lay high, and the snow during four severe winters was deep on its cold wet clay: consequently the outcome was so scanty that they had to give up part of their bargain, and surrender some of their stock; but they had a kind landlord, to whom they were probably indebted for their ability to struggle on, and abandon the idea of another migration. No one has moralised better on "the uses of adversity" than Burns; few so finely as when he says that misfortunes "let us ken oursel'": yet none more prone, when the pinch came, to blame his evil star, and to seek shelter from the world's censure and his own under "overwhelming circumstances." We have, however, the direct testimony of Gilbert to his steadfastness in one important respect—"His temperance and frugality were everything that could be desired." The effect of prevalent misconception on this point is visible, even in Mr Carlyle's, in many respects, incomparable essay. The poet had at Kirkoswald and Irvine learned to drink, and he was all his life liable to social excesses, but it is unfair to say that "his character for sobriety was destroyed."

Most of his best work was done at Mossiel, and inspired by the country around, or in Mauchline itself. This, the most suggestive of his haunts, has suffered less than most places from railway, or pit, or mine, or the importunity of professional showmen. A new road has been made through the quiet village, and a new steeple set in the midst of it without

doing much to mar its homeliness. The Poet, whose renown beyond the Atlantic brought hither Nathaniel Hawthorne, still haunts the streets. Our eyes may yet rest upon the Priory, and on the Corse, where he found the girl, who was his fate, hanging up clothes to dry. We have access to the crib in the Back Causeway to which he brought her home, and to the alehouse of Nanse Tinnock. Whence, through the churchyard, by the graves of the twins and the Armour, of Daddy Auld and his "black bonnet,"—William Fisher,—of the good Gavin and the ill-fated Margaret Kennedy, between the site of Moodie's tent and the lunching booths of the Holy Fair, we come to that of Johnny Dow's "Arms," with its "roaring trade" and the windows, from which the lovers beckoned across the lane. We pass on the other side to Poesie Nansie's howff, where "the vera girdle rang" with the wildest of vagrant revels, on which we can almost see Burns interloping with his cronies Richmond and Smith, or "setting up" the Cowgate with "Common-sense" Mackenzie, or loitering along the main with Lapraik and Kennedy. We picture him taking the east road and coming over "the drucken steps" to the race-course, where (in April 1784 or '85, *v.* Vols. I. and IV.) he first met "the jewel" of the "six proper young belles;" and so back by the upland fields to watch the gloamin' growing grey over the Galston moors; or the south to Catrine, where he was entertained and recognised by Dugald Stewart; or another to the Whitefoords at Ballochmyle; or another to Coilsfield, "the Castle o' Montgomerie," whose banks and braes yet blossom with his name, to call on his early patron, afterwards the Earl, Sir Hugh. Lastly, we loiter down the Faile till it trickles into the Ayr, by a grove more poetically hallowed than the fountain of Vacluse or Julie's bosque. There is no spot in Scotland so created for a modern idyl, none leaves us with such an impression of perfect peace as this, where the river, babbling over a shelf of pebbles to the left, then hushed through "birch and hawthorn," and Narcissus willows, murmuring on, heedless of the near and noisy world, keeps the memory green of our minstrel and his Mary.

Burns' life during the years 1784-86 was mainly concerned with three matters—a keen religious controversy, the intimacy that resulted in his marriage, the full blaze and swift recognition of his genius.

The poet, brought up like his countrymen in the Calvinistic theology, was by nature and circumstance soon led to question and “puzzle” the tenets of his ancestors. Proud of his polemic skill, and shining “in conversations between sermons,” he at Irvine, if not before, was familiarised with “liberal opinions” in speculation in connection with laxity in life; he continued to hold them in better company.

Ayrshire had been, for some time, the headquarters of a Theological Conservatism, often combined with Radical Politics; but, during this period, several of the pulpits were occupied by men affected by the wider views prevailing in the literary circles of the capital, where Polite Literature, seldom on close terms with Fanaticism, was represented by Robertson, and Blair, and Beattie, and Mackenzie. The clergymen of the “New Licht,” or Moderate party, were, compared with their antagonists, men of “light and leading,” learning and manners. They read more, wrote better, and studied their fellows from various points of view. Scholars and gentlemen, personally without reproach, they believed not only in good works, but occasionally in good cheer, made allowances for sins of blood, and were inclined to “gently scan their brother man, still gentler sister woman.” The representatives of the “Auld Licht” party, on the other hand, were more potent in the pulpit. M'Kinlay and Moodie,—Black Jock Russell and Peebles, Father Auld, and Steven “The Calf,” never shot over the heads of the people by references to Aristotle's Ethics or Cicero's Offices: they charmed the mob by the half physical excitement of vehement words and vulgar action: knotty points of faith, which their opponents were apt to slur, they cleared at once “wi' rattlin' and wi' thumpin',” and when patrons, like Glencairn, being men of culture, began in their appointments to be influenced by the regard

of like for like, they raised against them the cry of  
 "Patronage"—

"Come join your counsels and your skills  
 To cowe the lairds ;"

a cry, so well chosen in a democratic country that, despite Bacon's "*exceptis rebus divinis*," despite Burns' comment—

"And get the brutes the power themselves  
 To choose their herds,"

it has, after a century's fight, with results yet to be seen, carried the day. Few criticisms on the poet have done justice to his friends the Moderates. Liberal conservatives, with excessive "Economy," as is their wont, have passed the question by. The orators and pamphleteers of that offshoot of the Church, whose name is a masterpiece, almost a miracle, of misnomenclature, have been left free to rail at large at a body of men, on the whole, among the best of their age. Maligned as "mundane," because they looked on the round world as a place to live, not merely to die in ; and held to be "coarse-minded" because they did not become hysterical, the historian will give them the credit of helping to keep the country sane. That these men appreciated, esteemed, and invited Burns to their houses has of course been lamented : even the philosopher and guide of John Sterling says the poet learned "more than was good for him" at the tables of the New Light, but it is unjust to weight them, on the ground of unauthenticated anecdotes, with the responsibility of his already formed opinions. Accomplished Broad-Church clergymen may have pointed some of the arrows in his quiver, but it was the indecorum of his adversaries and loyalty to his friends that set them flying. By all accounts his landlord, Gavin Hamilton, was of the salt of the earth, upright, genial, "the puir man's friend," himself in word and deed a gentleman ; but he openly espoused the liberal cause, and the Rev. Mr Auld, a person, says Cromek, "of morose and malicious disposition," having had a feud with Hamilton's father, sought every occasion of venting his spite on the son, whose child he refused to christen, for the follow-

ing reasons:—Hamilton was seen on horseback and ordered his gardener to dig a few potatoes (for which the gardener was afterwards ecclesiastically dealt with) on the Lord's Day, he was heard to whistle on a Fast Day, and said "damn it" before Mr Auld's very face. High social position, stainless life and benevolence were as nothing against the fact that he played at cards, and on Sundays only went once to church; the straiter sect already regarded him with venomous looks. Robert Aitken, another staunch friend whose acquaintance Burns made at the Castle, and to whom he dedicated "The Cottar's Saturday Night," on similar grounds, came in for his share of the same narrow virulence. The poet, watching his opportunity, found it on one of the frequent occasions when the practice of those severe censors shamed their precept. Pecuniary differences are touch-stones of religious profession, and two shining Auld Licht divines, being at variance as to their parochial bounds, abused each other, in open court, with more than average theological indecency.

" Sic twa—O do I live to see't,  
 Sic famous twa should disagree,  
 An' names like villain, hypocrite,  
     Ilk ither ge'en,  
 While new-light herds with laughin' spite  
     Say neither's lee'in."

In this wise, Burns struck from the shoulder, and seizing on Pope's lacerating lines—

"Blockheads with reason wicked wits abhor,  
 But fool with fool is barbarous civil war,"

launched at the Pharisees his "Twa Herds, or Holy Tulyie." By this piece, towards the close of 1784, his reputation as a satirist, next to that of a lyrist his title deed to fame, was made at a stroke. No wonder the liberals, whose weakness lay in lack of demagogic art, clapped their hands and drank their claret, with added relish "upon that day"! Here was a man of the people, speaking for the people, and making the people hear him, fighting their battle in a manner

hitherto unknown among their ranks. The first shot fired, the guns of the battery rattled and rang, volley on volley. "Holy Willie's Prayer," with the Epistles to Goudie, Simpson, and M'Math, "The Holy Fair," besides "The Jolly Beggars" and the "Address to the Deil," inspired in part at least by the same spirit, were written in 1785. To the next year belong "the Ordination," the "Address to the Unco Guid," "The Calf," and the "Dedication to Hamilton,"—a sheaf which some of the admirers of the poet's softer mood would fain pluck out of his volume and cast like tares into the oven. They fail to perceive that, for good or ill, they represent as essential a phase of his genius as the lighter characters of the *Canterbury Tales* do that of Chaucer. Burns' religious satires are an inalienable part of his work; though, for some years after his Edinburgh success, the fire which prompted them smouldered, it sends out continual sparks in his letters, and three years later, on the prosecution of his friend M'Gill, it blazed into the fierce blast of "The Kirk's Alarm."

" Orthodox, orthodox, wha believe in John Knox,  
 Let me sound an alarm to your conscience ;  
 There's a heretic blast has been blawn in the West,  
 That what is no sense, must be nonsense."

A keen adversary and unscrupulous controversialist admits that these lines, once sent abroad, cannot be suppressed by Bowdlerism. "Leviathan is not so tamed." No, nor can Michael's flaming sword be so blunted. It is hard to say what the writer might not have done for religious liberty in Scotland, had not the weight of his judgment been lessened, as the cogency of Milton's views on Divorce, by the fact that he was, in part at least, fighting for his own hand. Speculative opinion has less to do with some aspects of morality than is generally supposed; but it was unfortunate for the poet that when the Kirk-Session of Mauchline met to look over their artillery they found, by his own confession, a weak point in his armour.

No biography of Burns can be complete that does not



discuss with some detail the delicate matters connected with his relation to the other sex; but, in the slight survey to which we are confined, it must be enough to glance at the main facts and draw an inference. Philosophical moralists have, with considerable force, asserted that the root of all evil is selfishness; but in practice this takes two directions so distinct that they mark two distinct types of evil, the one exhibited in various forms of dishonesty, hypocrisy, meanness, or fraud; the other in incontinence of speech, of diet, or in relations of sex. In the worst type, *e.g.*, that of Richardson's *Lovelace*, that of the deliberate seducer and deserter, they are combined. The chaste commercial rogue, who gives tithes of his plunder, is, as a rule, too tenderly dealt with by the Church; the man—unfairly not the woman—who yields to every gust, is perhaps too tenderly dealt with by the World. Burns, it must be admitted, was in this respect emphatically “passion's slave,” and yet a nation ostentatiously proud of its morality wears him in its “heart of hearts.” He was more reckless in his loves than Lord Byron, almost as much so as King David; but he was never treacherous, and, in contrast with the sickly sentimentalist Rousseau, he never sought to shirk the consequences of his misdeeds. When accordingly, in November 1784, his “Dear bought Bess,” the result of a liaison during the last days of *Lochlea*, made her appearance, she was hailed in “*The Welcome*” with a sincere affection, brought up in the family and shared their fortunes. This event brought Burns within the range of ecclesiastical censure, which, considering that it was an established custom, not to be waived out of respect even for the person of a poet, he too keenly resented. Shortly before or after, he was implicated in another affair with a more serious result. It is dogmatism to pretend certainty as to the date of his first meeting with his Jean, depending as it does on the original presence or interpolation of a stanza in the *Epistle to Davie*; but only in the last month of 1785 must their intimacy have culminated. Mr Armour, a well-to-do master mason, and strict “*Auld Licht*,”

who hated freedom of thought and speech when combined with poverty, from the first, set himself against the courtship as a prelude to an undesirable alliance. Burns was accordingly driven to contract a clandestine marriage by acknowledging the girl in writing as his wife; a form still valid. When, however, their relation was discovered, the incensed parents, with a disregard of her honour which forfeits their claim to our respect, persuaded her to destroy her "lines" and repudiate her bargain. By this step, assigned to April 13, 1786, and the transgressor's second appearance, July 9, on the bad eminence of the stool of repentance, with a view to obtain a certificate of bachelorship, both parties—mistakenly as lawyers now maintain—seem to have thought that the irregular alliance was annulled. The poet gave vent to his outraged feelings in "The Lament" and the last stanza of "The Daisy," and finding himself out of friends and favour, holding that "hungry ruin had him in the wind," gave up his share of the Farm, resolved to seek refuge in exile, and accepted a situation as bookkeeper to an estate in Jamaica. The Armour's rejecting his overtures of reconciliation and threatening him with legal proceedings, put spurs to his intent; he hurried on the publication of his poems, and with the proceeds bought a steerage passage in a ship to sail from Greenock on the 1st September.

Burns expected a wife to go with him or to follow him; but it was not Jean. Nothing in his career is so startling as the interlineation of his loves; they played about him like fire-flies; he seldom remembered to be off with the old before he was on with the new. Allured by two kinds of attraction, those which were mainly sensual seem scarcely to have interfered with others of a higher strain. It is now undoubted that his white rose grew up and bloomed in the midst of his passion-flowers. Of his attachment to Mary Campbell, daughter of a Campbelton sailor, and sometime nurse to the infant son of Gavin Hamilton, he was always chary of speech. There is little record of their intimacy previous to their betrothal on the

second Sunday, the 14th of May 1786, when, standing one on either bank of the Faille, they dipped their hands in the brook, and holding between them a Bible,—on the two volumes of which half obliterated inscriptions still remain,—they swore everlasting fidelity. Shortly after she returned to her native town, where “Will you go to the Indies, my Mary?” and other songs were sent to her. Having bespoken a place in Glasgow for Martinmas, she went in the autumn to Greenock to attend a sick brother, and caught from him a fever which proved fatal at some date before October 12, when her lair was bought in the West Kirkyard, now, on her account, the resort of pilgrims. Mrs Begg’s story of Burns receiving the news of her death has been called in question; but how deep the buried love lay in his heart is known to every reader of his verse. After flowing on in stillness for three years, it broke forth as the inspiration of the most pathetic of his songs—

“Thou lingering star with lessening ray,”

composed in the course of a windy October night, when musing and watching the skies about the corn-ricks at Ellisland. Three years later, it may have been about the same harvest time, even on the same anniversary, the receding past, with a throng of images, sad and sweet, again swept over him, and bodied itself forth in the immortal lyric—

“Ye banks and braes and streams around the Castle o’ Montgomery,”  
which is the last we hear of Highland Mary.

Meanwhile Burns had arrived at the full consciousness of being a poet, and, though speaking with almost unbecoming modesty of his rank, in comparison with Ramsay and Fergusson, had, by his own statement, as high an opinion of his work as he ever entertained. His fertility during the years 1785-86, more especially in the period between November 1785 and April 1786, has rarely been equalled. Among the pieces conceived behind the plough, and transcribed before he went to sleep in his garret over the “but and ben” of the farm-house, in addition to

his anti-Calvinistic satires, and Dr Hornbrook, of more local interest, were "The Twa Dogs," "The Author's Prayer," "The Vision," and "The Dream," "Halloween," "The Farmer's Address to his Mare," "The Cottar's Saturday Night," The two Epistles to Davie and three to Lapraik, the lines to a Mouse and to a Daisy, "Scotch Drink," "Man was made to mourn," and "The Jolly Beggars." These, with the exception of the last, along with some of his most popular songs, were included in his first volume. Preparations for publishing it at Kilmarnock began in April; it appeared on July 31st under the auspices of Hamilton, Aitken, and other of his friends. The result was an almost instant success, if not a thorough appreciation. Of an edition of 600, at the end of the month only 41 copies remained unsold. This epitome of a genius, so pronounced and so varied, expressing itself so tersely and yet so clearly—for there was not a word in the volume that any Scotch peasant who could read could fail to understand—took its audience by storm, and set all the shores of the West in a murmur of acclaim. It only brought to the author £20 direct return, but it introduced him to the literary world. Mrs Dunlop of Dunlop began with him the correspondence which testifies to a nine years' friendship. Dugald Stewart invited him to his house at Catrine, where he met Lord Daer, and found his first experience of the aristocracy a very pleasant one. Somewhat later H. Mackenzie gave him a favourable review in the *Lounger*, extracts from which were copied into the London papers. Of Stewart, Burns speaks at all times with affectionate respect; the philosopher bears as emphatic testimony to the favourable impression made by the first appearance of the poet, and to the high qualities of mind which he exhibited in their frequent walks together about the Braid Hills in the subsequent spring—to the independence of his manners, a consciousness of worth devoid of vanity, and the fluency, precision, and originality of his speech. "He had a very strong sense of religion, and expressed deep regret at the levity with which he had

heard it treated in some convivial meetings." "All the faculties of his mind were equally vigorous." "From his conversation I should have pronounced him fitted to excel in whatever walk of ambition he had chosen to exert his abilities. He was fond of remarking on character, shrewd, and often sarcastic, but extravagant in praise of those he loved. Dr Robertson thought his prose, considering his education, more remarkable than his verse."

From August till the middle of November, during which time he had written "The Brigs of Ayr," "The Lass of Ballochmyle," "Tam Samson's Elegy," and other minor pieces, preparations for the poet's departure were proceeding. On the 26th of September he writes to his Montrose cousin that it will not take place till after harvest; but, a month later, he is still bent on the Indies. Coming back over Galston Moor from a visit to that excellent Moderate (his friend, Dr Laurie of Loudon), he wrote "The gloomy night is falling fast," ending "Farewell, the bonie banks of Ayr."

In the interval, incited by Mr Hamilton to venture on a second edition, he was discouraged by the temerity of the Kilmarnock printer; but an enthusiastic letter, transmitted by Laurie, from the blind poet, Dr Blacklock, and the prospect of the support of the Earl of Glencairn, induced him to stay his steps and try his fortune in the Scotch metropolis. He who had sung "Freedom and whisky gang together," was not to be an overseer of slaves, but an exciseman. He left Mauchline on a pony on the 27th, and reached Edinburgh on the 28th November, with passports that promised him a fair start, in the "pastures new," on which he now, in his twenty-ninth year, broke ground.

V.—*Fifth Period, Edinburgh, Nov. 1786 — May 1788.*  
(Æt. 28-30.)

In the northern capital of these days there was more of Auld Reekie, less of Modern Athens; the iron-road had not replaced the Nor-Loch, the main thoroughfare ran down from

the Castle to Holyrood, and the banks of the valley were undisfigured by domineering hotels or the College towers which have roused Mr Ruskin's wrath. The first sight of a city, moreover, is as attractive to a countryman, as the first glimpse of the sea to an inlander. We can easily imagine that the poet, attracted alike by the picturesque grandeur of the place and its historical associations, spent the first days after his arrival in wandering about the quaint old streets, looking into shop windows, rambling up Arthur Seat, and gazing over the Frith on the Lomonds. We can fancy him taking off his hat at the threshold of Allan Ramsay's barber shop, or seeking out the "narrow house" of Fergusson, in Canongate Kirk, and kneeling to kiss the sod on which he, at his own expense, erected the memorial to his neglected predecessor. But if he kept apart for a time from society, it was from choice not necessity; armed with introductions to Dr Blacklock and the Earl of Glencairn, the favour of Mr Stewart, and that of his amiable critic, Mr Mackenzie, secured, and the literary world of the place on tip-toe to see him, he soon became acquainted with Drs Blair and Gregory, Mr Frazer Tytler, Henry Erskine, Lord Monboddo (who had vaguely guessed what Mr Darwin is generally held to have proved), and his daughter, the fair theme of several of his minor verses. In short, before a week was over, he found himself, in his own words, suddenly "translated from the veriest shades of life" to the centre of the most distinguished circles. He was by the scholars of that brilliant time, by the bench and the bar, by fashion and by beauty, welcomed, courted, feasted, and admired. "The town," wrote Mrs Cockburn towards the close of the year, "is at present all agog with the ploughman poet. . . He has seen Duchess Gordon and all the gay world. His favourite for looks and manners is Bess Burnett, no bad judge indeed." It has been suggested that the sudden change of life must have been prejudicial to his health; but no man was ever less spoiled by adulation.

When Burns first saw the mental and social aristocracy of the land, and they saw him, they met on equal terms. "In the whole strain of his bearing," we are told, "he mani-

festated his belief that in the society of the most eminent men of his nation he was exactly where he was entitled to be; hardly deigning to flatter them by exhibiting a symptom of being flattered." "I never saw a man," says Scott, "in company with his superiors in station or information more perfectly free from either the reality or the affectation of embarrassment. His address to females was extremely deferential, with a turn either to the pathetic or the humorous, which engaged their attention particularly. . . . He was much caressed in Edinburgh, but the efforts made for his relief were extremely trifling." With all his essential modesty, the poet must have felt a glow of triumph at the impression made by his matchless conversational power, according to Lockhart, who had the reports of auditors, "the most remarkable thing about him." The Duchess of Gordon said he was the only man who ever "carried her off her feet;" Ramsay of Ochtertyre, "I have been in the company of many men of genius, but never witnessed such flashes of intellectual brightness as from him, the impulse of his moment, sparks of celestial fire;" and the brilliant Maria Riddell, the best friend of his later days, "I hesitate not to affirm—and in vindication of my opinion I appeal to all who had the advantage of personal acquaintance with him—that poetry was actually not his *forte* . . . none have ever outshone Burns in the charm—the sorcery I would almost call it—of fascinating conversation. . . . The rapid lightnings of his eye were always the harbingers of some flash of genius. . . . His voice alone could improve upon the magic of his eye." The poet went home from assemblages of learning, wit, and grace, where he had been posing professors, arguing down lawyers, and turning the heads of reigning beauties, to share with his friend Richmond, then a writer's apprentice, a crib in Baxter's Close, Lawnmarket, for which they paid together three shillings a week. Not unfrequently he dropped in by the way upon gatherings of another sort, knots of boon companions met where the wine went faster and the humour was more akin to that of the Tarbolton Lodge. For the chief of these free-thoughted and

loose-worded clubs, nicknamed that of the Crochallan Fencibles, he afterwards compiled the collection of unconventional songs\*—some amusing, others only rough—known as the “Merry Muses,” to which he contributed a few pieces. Like Chaucer, he owed half his power to the touch of Bohemianism that demands now and then a taste of wild life. The English poet did not meet his Host or Miller among his fellow ambassadors, and the Scotch bard must often have left the company of Drs Blair and Robertson with an irresistible impulse to have his fling among the Rattlin’ Willies of the capital, whose example possibly led him to form other connections of a kind to be regretted. But it is hard to see how this could have been prevented by any interposition of his high-class friends, or how, despite Scott’s reproach, they could, at this stage, have done anything for the pecuniary relief of a man at once so wayward and so proud. They did him substantial service in facilitating the publication of his poems, and taking measures to ensure their success. Lord Glencairn introduced him to the publisher Creech, and got the members of the Caledonian Hunt to take 100 copies of the second edition. It appeared, 21st April 1787, had nearly 3000 subscribers, and ultimately brought the author about £500; a sum which enabled him, besides handing over a handsome amount, £200, to his brother, to undertake several excursions, and, when the time came, to stock a new farm. This volume, containing most of the pieces in the Kilmarnock impression, with others, as the “Winter Night” (the sole important product of December 1786), was several times reprinted during his life. In the spring, Burns entered into an agreement to aid the engraver Johnson in his “Museum,” to the six volumes of which—the last published shortly after his death—he gave about 180 songs. In September 1792 he was invited by Mr George Thomson to supply material for a similar work, the “Melodies of Scotland.” On this undertaking also, he entered with alacrity, only stipulating that he should not be required to

\* Burns kept this volume under lock and key, and it was only printed, with doubtful propriety, for limited circulation, after his death.



write in classic English, and contributed in all about 100 songs, wholly original, or so recast from older models as to make them really new.

The leisure of the last nine years of the poet's life, *i.e.*, from 1787 to 1796, was almost wholly devoted to these two enterprises; his other poetic performances being, with one exception, insignificant. Nothing was said about money, and his work was, in the one case entirely, in the other nearly, gratuitous. On the publication of his first half volume, Thomson, with a note of thanks, sent to Burns a shawl for his wife, a picture by Allan representing the "Cottar's Saturday Night," and £5. Such an acknowledgment of a treasure "above rubies" has provoked inevitable derision. It has been pleaded for Thomson that he had then only received an instalment of a tenth part of the work, that he was far from affluent, and that he put the whole of the songs at the disposal of Dr Currie, when on the poet's death that gentleman was about to edit an edition for the benefit of his family. At all events, Burns indignantly stopped any similar advance: he only forbears returning his correspondent's "pecuniary parcel" because "it might savour of affectation;" if he hears a word more of such "debtor and creditor traffic" he will "spurn the whole transaction;" his songs are "either below or above price." Whatever the "motif" of this letter—a point which his inconsistency in money matters, for he had not hesitated to dun Creech for his due, and his frequent irony, leaves doubtful—he abode by his determination never again to write for "cold unfeeling ore." In 1795 when requested by the editor of a high-class London newspaper to furnish weekly an article for the "poetical department" at a remuneration of £52 a year, he refused the offer. It is calculated that, including the profits of the reissue of his poems in 1793, he had up to the date of his death received for the literary labour of fifteen years about £900; less than a third of the sum paid to Moore for "Lallah Rooke," but a hundred times the outcome to Milton of "Paradise Lost." Wisely, in any case, Burns was never seduced by a popularity he feared to be

evanescent, to think of literature as a means of livelihood. He adopted, by anticipation, the advice of Sir Walter Scott—never more apposite than now—“let your pen be your pastime, your profession your anchor,” and, with the idea of an independence at the plough-tail foremost in his mind, was already negotiating with Mr Patrick Miller of Dalswinton for a tenancy of a farm on the banks of the Nith. With a view to explore the ground, he on May 5th started on the Border tour, with his friend Ainslie of the Crochallans, of most of which we have in his journal a sufficient record. From other sources we learn that, on his return, he arrived at Mossgiel on the 8th of June. “O Robbie,” his mother is said to have cried, as she met her son unannounced at the farm-house door. Enough has been said—sometimes rather rhapsodically—of an event so ready for rhetoric. The prodigal had gone into a far country and returned with a laurel crown. In the old homestead all was sunshine, no one suspects maternal tenderness or scrutinises fraternal praise; but the poet did not receive so graciously the civilities of his “plebeian brethren,” who, nine months before, had taken the other side of the street, and were ready to hound him into exile. The adulation of success which follows on insolence to calamity is sure, on another turn of the wheel, to be again reversed; and Burns was all through the blare and blaze manfully conscious that his triumph was meteoric.

The old Armour was conspicuously deferential, and got the return they deserved in his expression of disgust at their “mean, servile compliance.” With the daughter it was different, and he flew, as Professor Wilson naively expresses it, “too fervently to the arms of his Jean.” After hovering for a few days about Mauchline, he, driven by a wandering impulse or lured by the haunts of his lost Mary, rushed off on an expedition to the West Highlands, that has been called mysterious, because we have no record of it, save a few letters and an epigram composed at Inveraray, which shows, as might have been expected, that he did not find

the atmosphere of the metropolis of the Argyles congenial. After a month spent, on his return, in Ayrshire, we find him, early in August, back in Edinburgh, where the fame of his volume made him more a lion than ever in the circles of his former friends, and opened to him others. Unmoved by flattery or favour he, in one respect only, betrayed a morbid self-consciousness. He was suspicious of being stared at, intolerant of condescension, and too nervously on his guard against the claims of learning or of rank. This feeling appears in the "Winter Night" and passages of the Common-place Book, in which he takes notes of the "characters and manners" as they rose around him. These pen and ink sketches are, on the whole, conceived in a spirit of friendliness, but they are also coloured by a cynical vein, and it is hardly to be wondered at that when extracts—of course the severest—began to be circulated people did not feel envious of a place among them. There is little to add of the spring and summer of this year save a few records of the poet's impressionableness, generosity, and patriotic enthusiasm. In January he writes to Hamilton that he has almost persuaded a Lothian farmer's daughter to accompany him. In February he applied for and obtained permission to erect the tombstone over Fergusson. In March, answering Mrs Scott of Wauchope, he wrote the famous Epistle, with the well-worn lines beginning, "E'en then a wish, I mind its power," and sent some grateful verses to Glencairn, which, as appears, he did not obtain permission to publish. The memory of that accomplished nobleman rests securely on the stanzas afterwards inspired by the premature close (in 1791) of his generous life, "The bridegroom may forget the bride," than which there has been no finer tribute of genius to worth, since Simonides and Pindar exalted the fame of the kings of Syracuse. In April, in course of a Prologue for the benefit of the veteran Scotch Roscius (Mr Wood), Burns, after referring to Hume, Robertson, and Reid, as glories of Caledonia, perpetrated his worst criticism—

"Here Douglas forms wild Shakespeare into plan,"

and in May, writing to Mr Tytler of Woodhouselee on the "Vindication of Mary Stuart," his worst lines—

"Though something like moisture conglobes in my eye,  
Let no one misdeem me disloyal."

On the 25th he started with the schoolmaster Nicol, another Crochallan, on a three months' tour in the Eastern Highlands, in the course of which he visited Queen Mary's birth-room at Linlithgow, the tomb of Sir John the Græme at Falkirk, the Carron Works,—which he compared to the mouth of the Pit,—Bannockburn, scrawling on the window of the inn at Stirling the dangerous stanza spread abroad to his harm.

"The injured Stuart line is gone," &c.,

Strathallan, suggesting the lament, "Thickest night around me dwelling," Dunkeld, Birnam Hill, Aberfeldy, and the ducal residence at Blair, where he met Mr Graham of Fintry, and gave the toast, "Athole's honest men, and Athole's bonnie lasses." They passed through Rothiemurchus and Aviemore by Strathspey to Findhorn and Castle Cawdor, then over Culloden to Forres and Shakespeare's witch muir. We next find the poet entertained at Castle Gordon,—an event commemorated in some of his most graceful English verses,—and hurried away by the jealous impatience of his companion, then returning by Aberdeen (where he met some of his relatives and Bishop Skinner, son of the author of "Tullochgorum," which he extravagantly pronounced the best of Scotch songs): we trace him through Montrose to Perth and up the Almond Water, looking for the scene of "Bessie Bell and Mary Gray," and so by Kinross and Queensferry to Edinburgh. Ere the month was out he made, with Dr Adair, a fourth excursion, the main point of interest in which is his residence at Harvieston, and intimacy with Miss Margaret Chalmers, to whom he in vain offered his hand. On the same occasion he made the acquaintance of Mr Ramsay of Ochtertyre on the Teith, knelt on Bruce's grave in the Cathedral of

Dunfermline, and then, "from grave to gay," having persuaded Adair to sit on the stool of repentance, administered to him a parody of his own rebuke. At Clackmannan he was knighted by an ancient lady with the sword of her ancestor, the good King Robert, and, nothing loath, responded to her toast, "Hoolie uncas," *i.e.*, "Awa' Whigs, awa'."

Burns refers to his Highland trip in particular as "perfectly inspiring," but its only poetic outcome of much consequence was "Macpherson's Lament," the death-song of a freebooter (recalling that of Regnar Lodbrog), on the wild grandeur of which Mr Carlyle has eloquently dwelt. The fact that these expeditions yielded so little direct harvest may be explained in part by the business purpose of the first, and the ill-adjusted companionship of the third; more by the prodigious productiveness of the two previous years, and the social excitement of the six preceding months. The soil on which rich crops grow must sometimes lie fallow. Add that the spirit of poetry bloweth where it listeth, that to a mind of emphatically spontaneous power the fact of being expected to write was a bar to inspiration, that Burns, unlike Scott, only took delight in fine scenery as a frame to living interests, and we scarcely require to consider the fatigues of travel in the days when a sturdy lexicographer's journey to the Hebrides was a matter of more adventure than is now that of a lady to the Rocky Mountains or the Sandwich Isles.

Back in Edinburgh, the poet shifted to more comfortable quarters in St James' Square, where he lived with Mr Cruikshank, whose sister is the Rosebud of his Muse. The rest of the year was mainly devoted to negotiations with Johnson, letters about the "Erebean fanatics," who were persecuting Hamilton and M'Gill, and stray verses addressed to Peggy Chalmers. On December 8, thrown from a hackney coach, he sustained an injury serious enough to lay him aside for six weeks, during which he expresses despairing disgust of life, and describes himself as "the sport, the miserable victim of rebellious pride, hypochondriac imagination, agonising sensibility, and Bedlam passions."

Poetic natures are rarely stoical, and a man accustomed to walk the fields in the morning, to blaze in society at night, naturally chafes under confinement with a disabled limb. Burns was besides beginning to smart from the fickleness—none the less that he had anticipated it—of “Fortune beguiling.” His day of “grace, acceptance, and delight” had passed its noon. The town had had its fill of the prodigy, and the sigh of the Reminiscences made the doors of the great move more slowly on their hinges.

The proud poet in later days, when the castle grew cold, sought solace in the “howff,” now he frequented the Crochallans, or wandered about the crags. He had been foiled in one love-suit, and was prosecuting another under difficulties. Our space will only permit us to sum the evidence bearing on this strange story. On December 7th, Burns, at the table of a common friend, met Mrs M<sup>c</sup>Lehose, a lady whose husband had gone to the West Indies and left her with limited means to bring up two children in retirement in Potterow. Handsome, lively, well read, of easy manners and a ready wit, a writer of verses, sentimental and yet ardent, she was born in the same year as Burns, and told him that she shared his dispositions, and would have been his twin-brother had she been a man. Two such beings were obviously made for one another, and they lost no time in finding it out. The above-mentioned accident having prevented their taking tea together, on the following day he received her condolences with rapture. If he was, as lawyers maintain, at this time a married man, he did not know it; but she was aware that she was only a grass-widow, and she was virtuous. Their correspondence must therefore be conducted with discretion, and “friendship,” not “love,” must be their watchword. How to reconcile the pretence with the reality was the trouble. Let them take the names of Clarinda and Sylvander, and exchange their compliments with the pastoral innocence of shepherd and shepherdess in the Golden Age. So it went on, letters flying to and fro, like carrier pigeons, then greetings from windows, visits, risks, recoilings, fresh assignations, reproaches and reconcili-

ations, wearisome to us, alternately tantalising and alluring to the mutually fascinated pair. It is perhaps impossible to get at the absolute truth in this business, and if conjecture errs, it ought to be on the side of charity. One point has been now made plain, it was no case of mere philandering. Beneath all Clarinda's verbiage there throbs the pulse of a real passion, afraid of itself, and yet incapable of surrendering its object. She knew that she was playing with edge-tools, but she had confidence in the strength of her principles to draw the line. Sylvander writes more like an artist, never with so much apparent affectation as in many of those letters—fustian and bombast they often are, but as to their being falsetto is another matter. On all that Burns wrote there is some stamp of the same strong mind; but he was capable of moulding his style on that of his correspondents, and adapting his sentiments to theirs to such a degree as often to contradict himself. When we compare his letter of the 2nd March to Mrs M'Lehose with that of the 3rd to Ainslie, we are tempted to apply to the former his own line, "'Tis a' finesse in Rob Mossiel." But this plastic faculty, the actor's power, the weakness of over sympathetic or electric natures, is wrongly confounded with deliberate deceit; it is an invariable accompaniment of dramatic genius, which takes its colour from what it works in, "like the dyer's hand." The poet's religious moods were as genuine as those in which he led the chorus of Crochallan: the former were elicited by contact with religious people; but he never even to them pretends to be orthodox; he is constantly fighting with Clarinda's Calvinism, and trying to undermine her confessor, Kemp. It therefore by no means follows that, in his offer to meet her "at the Throne of Grace," he was playing the hypocrite: if he did so, it was the worst thing he ever did.

Howbeit, this love-making was his main occupation, till, in February, he had news from Mauchline which naturally distressed and seems less naturally to have surprised him. Jean was again about to become a mother, and this time her father had turned her out of the house. Burns, of course,

rushed to the rescue, established her in the neighbourhood with the comforts essential to her condition, and succeeded in reconciling her to her mother; but he was at first incapable of shaking off the spell of the syren, and wrote to Clarinda the somewhat heartless letter about the "farthing candle" and "the meridian sun,"—the former being the woman who was little more than a month later to become his wife, and to be through good and ill report the faithful and forbearing helpmate of the remaining eight years of his life. On February 25th he went to Dumfriesshire and took the farm of Ellisland. "A poet's choice," said Allan Cunningham's father, "Foregirth had better soil;" and perhaps the views of the Nith had something to do with it. The lease was signed March 13th, the day on which Jean's second pair of twins are supposed to have made their appearance. They, however, only survived a few weeks. On the 17th Burns returned to Edinburgh, and on the 22nd had a farewell meeting with his "divine poetess." This, says one narrator, "was the last of the serio-comic episode of Clarinda." It is hardly so; the episode, more serious than comic, had an epilogue; the correspondence continued intermittently, and the renewal of their intimacy, after more than three years of domestic life, resulted in at least one immortal verse.

The poet left Edinburgh on the 24th, having arranged with his publisher, and sent, as we have seen, a share of his profits to Gilbert. He had also applied to Mr Graham for a place in the Excise, the duties of which he hoped to combine with those of a farmer in the same district. His name being placed on the list, he was afterwards appointed to a post of £50 (raised in course of time to £70) a year, which he congratulates himself on having obtained without any hanging on or mortifying solicitation. On the 26th he was in Glasgow, on the 30th riding over the moors between Galloway and Ayrshire. It has been conjectured that he may then have come to the resolve to throw over his poetical grass-widow and do his duty by the comparatively illiterate girl who for him had given up everything. A letter to Miss Chalmers, April 6th, is however our first distinct intimation of



this resolve. On the 28th he admits to his old friend James Smith that he has made another irregular marriage. It was afterwards (May 2nd) solemnised in the house of Gavin Hamilton, as a Justice of the Peace, and on August 2nd solemnly confirmed at the annual communion in Mauchline, when both parties were reprimanded, expressed regret for their conduct, and "Mr Burns," by way of fine, "gave a guinea for the poor." Jean did not sign her name, so her husband did it for her; but only six weeks later he "acknowledges her letter," so the non-signature must have been due to nervousness. In frequent references to the event (especially that about the Synod in his heart) the poet takes too much credit for his conduct, but he always adds that he expects to have no reason to regret it. "I can fancy how, but I have never seen where, I could have made it better," is his rather ungracious refrain. In a note to Miss Chalmers on the 16th, he says that his wife had read nothing but the Bible and his verses (in singing which he often praises her voice), but that his marriage had taken him "out of villainy." Clarinda, however, was of an opposite opinion, and on the news wrote a furious letter, calling Burns "a villain;" an accusation to which, in a dignified reply of March 1789, he refuses to plead guilty, being "convinced of innocence, though conscious of folly." There appears, we must confess, more of the latter than the former in the whole extraordinary story, the sum of which is that the poet had entangled himself with two women, and married the one he loved least, but to whom he was far the more deeply bound.

VI.—*Sixth Period, Ellisland, July 1788—October 1791.*  
(Æt. 30-33.)

Burns left Edinburgh emphatically for good. His first winter had been, like Byron's one brilliant London year, over roses all the way; in the second he had to walk on withered leaves. His old temptations had led him into trouble, even threatened to harden his heart, and some of his great friends were doing their best to corrupt his taste.

The criticism of the eighteenth century is by no means so contemptible as it is the fashion to represent it; the English of Robertson, even the Latinised style of Blair, was better than the simpleton Anglo-Saxonism of recent antiquarians; but it was not the manner of writing proper to Burns, and their square and rule were ill-adapted for the measurement of his wood-notes. When a man adopts a style unnatural to him, he adopts its most exaggerated or degenerate forms; when the author of the "Jolly Beggars" tried to mimic the verse of Pope, the result was a reproduction of Hayley. When he expressed to Clarinda his belief that "the soul is capable of inflammation," he reminds us not of Steele but of the Della-Cruscans; he deserves a place in the "Loves of the Triangles," when he "conglobes a tear." His metaphors are often laboured; his allegories of "wisdom dwelling with prudence," etc., are lame travesties of the "Vision of Mirza." The dedications, acknowledgements, and other letters of the period have the same taint. In writing to Lords Buchan and Eglinton he is not at his ease, as he would have been in conversation with them. It seems unnecessary to inform the one that he is incapable of mercenary servility, and when he gratefully remembers the honour of a suggestion from the other, which he inly ridiculed, we feel how near affectation may approach to insincerity. Burns only escaped the latter vice by timely rescue from an atmosphere that was becoming unwholesome, and which no high and most probably unsuitable alliance could have made otherwise. Burns had all the "honest pride" of which he says too much, and would stoop for neither smile nor favour, but to humour the great people at their dances he wore a thin mask, and painfully went through a minuet with hob-nailed shoes. How bad the spoken criticism of his censors must sometimes have been, we may judge by some of the specimens which have been printed, *e.g.*:—Dr Gregory's rejection of "The Lass of Ballochmyle," and his "swashing blows," beating the last bit of life out of the poet's untimely wounded hare; Dr Moore's recommendation to avoid the use of the Scotch dialect; Dr Blair's refusal to allow "Tam o' Shanter"

to be printed for the benefit of his family as an appendix to the remains of Michael Bruce; and George Thomson's suggestion that "Welcome to your gory bed" be softened into "Welcome to your honour's bed," are among the most ludicrous in literature. True genius seldom wants advice; but the habit of offering it is with some as inveterate as that of gambling or drink. Fortunately Burns seldom paid much heed to the cavils of men who "spun their thread so fine that it was neither fit for warp nor woof," and though, from good-nature, he sometimes permitted his verses to be spoiled, on afterthought a better judgment generally restored them. In his fragment of a Scotch Dunciad, "The Poet's Progress," he calls critics "those cut-throat bandits on the paths of fame," and his reception of Alison's "Essay on Taste," proves that on occasion he could turn and bite the biters. On perusing this politely dressed model of conclusive irony, Stewart innocently remarks on the mastery of the laws of association shown by the poet.

The lease of Ellisland ran from Whitsunday, but Burns did not take possession till the middle of June. His time till the end of autumn was occupied in getting ready the farm, and rushing backward and forward over a distance of forty-five miles, between Dumfriesshire and Mauchline where his wife continued to reside. Present or absent, his dominant feeling during this honeymoon, lengthened by interruption, was that which inspires one of his most deservedly popular songs, "Of a' the airts the wind can blaw." When alone he was a prey to many moods, for solitude never suited him, and his first impressions of the Nithsdale folk were unfavourable. "Nothing flourishes among them," he exclaims, "but stupidity and canting; they have as much idea of a rhinoceros as of a poet," and "their whisky is rascally." Ere the month was over he had, however, opened up friendly relations, only interrupted near the close of his life, with the Riddells of Glenriddell, and had written the well-known verses in Friars' Carse Hermitage, conceived in a spirit of Horatian content. About the same time he was giving an appreciative study to Spenser, and to Dryden's

Georgics of Virgil, criticising amateur verses with which he now began to be pestered, writing a remonstrance to the *London Star* against the anti-Jacobite demonstrations at the centenary of the "Glorious Revolution," and sending to Blacklock his ideas of a model wife, whose "head is immaterial in comparison with her heart."

In the first week of December he brought Mrs Burns to "the Isle," a steading a mile down the Nith, where they remained for about seven months, till everything was ready to enable them to move up to Ellisland. Now, if ever, were the poet's halcyon days. He had to all appearance found a quiet haven, a good landlord, a promising farm, and a loving helpmate. He could look forward to rearing his own crops, walking over the fields, or loitering by the river banks, enjoying his own thoughts and setting his new words to old tunes. Master of his surroundings, he hoped at last to be master of himself: his elastic temper let him put by the shadows of the past, and he brought into mid-winter the spirit of the spring. His songs of this period are marked by a more genuine buoyancy than either before or after. Beginning with the defiant little lilt, "I hae a wife o' my ain," he quickly followed it by two of his most famous lyrics, "Auld Lang Syne," in which he turned a tame original into the national song of peaceful, as "Scots wha hae" is of warlike, Scotland; and "The Silver Tassie," beginning, "Go fetch to me a pint of wine," a drinking song with the aroma of Lovelace or Herrick. Burns had set before himself a model domestic life, and for a time maintained it. He helped Mr Riddell to establish a public library, had family worship after his fashion, and went to church for example, though he found Mr Kilpatrick rather "dronthy." Respected by his servants, esteemed by his neighbours, beloved at home, his ambition was to act up to his verse, and "make a happy fireside clime for weans and wife."

The new year 1789 opened brightly: on the first day he wrote to Mrs Dunlop one of his longest and finest letters. Soon afterwards an angry gust has recorded itself in the

outbreak of ferocity, "Dweller in yon dungeon dark," provoked by his being turned out of a roadside inn, on a bitter night, to make way for the pompous funeral cortège of Mrs Oswald. Burns was a dangerous person to offend, and the quarrelsome lads of the district did well to hold their peace when he threatened to "hang them up in sang like potato-bogles." He was a good disciplinarian, and, while generally indulgent to his servants, came down heavily on dense stupidity or obvious neglect. About Midsummer his delight in chastising wrong-doers found vent in smiting the Philistines with "The Kirk's Alarm," a ringing blast about which he seems to have taken some trouble, one among numerous comments on his theory of literary work. "I have no great faith in the boastful pretensions to intuitive propriety and unlaboured elegance. The rough material of fine writing is certainly the gift of genius; but I as firmly believe that the workmanship is the united effort of pains, attention, and repeated trial." It would have been well had this passage been impressed on the minds of his imitators, of whom the first of too many crops had begun to appear. "My success," he complains, "has encouraged such a swarm of ill-spawned monsters to crawl into public note under the title of Scotch poets that the very term Scotch poetry borders on the burlesque." During the whole of this period Burns was actively engaged on the farm, taking his full share of hard work, and maintaining perfect sobriety; but he found leisure to write several songs, among them, "John Anderson my Jo," and a number of letters from which an anthologia of his wit, wisdom, and tenderness might be constructed. The series addressed to his brother William would be amusing were it not for its closing in about a year with a record of the poor lad's death among strangers. "Form good habits," and above all "learn taciturnity," is the refrain of advice which this comparatively commonplace member of the family must have found it as easy as his monitor found it impossible to follow. Towards the close of July the Excise appointment was conferred, and shortly after the family left the Isle for Ellisland, where

(August 18) Francis Wallace, the second son, made his appearance, and about the same time Robert, the eldest, now three years old, was brought from Mauchline. The few notable incidents of the succeeding months are familiar in connection with the verses to which they gave rise. A September meeting with Nicol and Masterton at Moffat was the inspiration of "Willie brewed a peck o' maut;" the "mighty claret shed" at Friars' Carse, in October, of the famous "Whistle." Mr Douglas seems to have made out that Burns on that occasion was present only in spirit, not in body; but the fact that the verses must have been written five days after "Thou lingering Star" has not failed to evoke comment on the rapidly shifting moods of the Borealis race, of which he was a consummate type.

Round the dawn of 1790 clouds began to thicken. Ellisland was after all proving as profitless in the poet's hands as Lochlea or Mossiel. Whether it was owing to want of skill—want of energy it was not—or a luckless choice of soil and situation, he was, as a farmer, destined to one chagrin after another, and had to fall back on his "second line of defence," the Excise, a defence unfortunately exposed to the attacks of enemies from within. There was undoubtedly some irony in his choice of a profession, of which no one was so sensible as himself. He refers to it fitfully in mocking verse and serious prose, now fearing the "Parnassian queans" will disdain him, now manfully asserting, "I would rather have it said that my profession borrowed credit from me than I from my profession;" again complaining that the extent of his ten parishes, compelling him to ride some 200 miles a week, is a strain on his strength. Documentary evidence, especially that recently made public, demonstrates that, during the seven years of his service, he discharged his duty to the Crown admirably well, and under trying circumstances with the utmost possible consideration and humanity. The stale text "*suaviter in modo, fortiter in re*" was never more apt. In dealing with poor old women and other retailers on a small scale of "home-brewed" he strained the law in their favour, and sometimes

gave them timely warning. On the other hand, he was so severe on hardened offenders that in one year his decreet perquisites reached the maximum known in the district. The evil of his new business was that it led him to spend so much of his time from home, and to mix so much in questionable society. Towards Midsummer he was prone to linger in Dumfries at the Globe Tavern, where a "guid willie waught" was not the sole attraction. The landlady's niece, a certain Annie Park, was, we are told, thought beautiful by the guests when they were in a state that made them tolerant in matters of taste. With this Annie of "the gowden locks," the poet contracted an intimacy that inspired what he himself regarded as the best love song he ever composed, "Yestreen I had a pint of wine," and resulted in the birth (March 31, 1791) of his second Elizabeth. The mother, being no more heard of, is supposed to have died. The child was first sent to Mossgiel, and then brought to Ellisland, to be nursed by the much enduring Jean along with her third son, William Nicol, born just ten days later. Burns had again broken loose: "the native hue of his resolution" was blurred over by the red fires of passion, when in a defiant mood he threw off the stanzas beginning, "I murder hate," and ending with a notable proof of his Biblical knowledge. In other directions he was wasting his genius on election ballads, on prologues and addresses for the local theatre, and on furious prose execrations against the Puritans, the Edinburgh police, and things in general. But his genuine inspiration—though he complains of the Muse's visits being "short and far between"—had not deserted him. July gave birth to the elegy and epitaph, among the finest in the language, on Mathew Henderson. In September Captain Grose, an antiquarian Falstaff to whom he had been introduced at Friars' Carse, (the subject of one of the poet's most good humoured epigrams, and of the lines, "Hear Land o' Cakes and Brither Scots"), having got from him three traditionary stories of Alloway Kirk, recommended Burns to put them into verse. The result was "Tam o' Shanter" thrown off in one day's walk along the Nith, in an ecstasy, as Mrs

Burns narrates; but matured into its published form during the three succeeding months. Of this period there are extant several records of friends or strangers who came to visit him; among them the pleasant pastoral of Ramsay of Ochertyre with the quotation, "uxor Sabina qualis," and that of two English gentlemen who found him angling with a fox skin cap on his head, and a broadsword hanging from his belt.\* The next year is marked by little of note, save three instances of the poet's generous sympathy:—his interest in the publication of Bruce's poems, his Ode for the coronation of James Thomson's monument at Ednam, and his interposition in favour of the school-master, Clarke, threatened with dismissal for severity to his boobies—an interference which seems ultimately to have been successful. During the summer Burns had four disabling falls from his horse; but he produced the elegy on Miss Burnet, the lament for Glencairn, the Banks of Doon, "Bonnie wee thing" in honour of Miss Davies, and began to celebrate, under the name of Chloris, a Miss Jean Lorimer, who from this date till the close of 1795 was his reigning beauty. He wrote besides several letters and some Jacobite songs, the chief of which, "Farewell thou fair day, thou green earth, and ye skies," was a favourite of the poet Campbell. Currie says it is "a hymn worthy of the palmy days of the Grecian muse." At midsummer, Burns had determined to leave his farm, and, the roup of the stock having been effected in September, the family flitted to the headquarters of the rest of his life, Dumfries.

VII.—*Period, Dumfries, 1791—1796. Æt. 33-37.*

- a. *The Wee Vennel (Bank Street), Oct. 1791—May 1793.*
- b. *The Mill Vennel (Burns Street), May 1793—May 1796.*

Poets have thriven among the hills, nowhere else could Wordsworth, or amid the turmoil of a city, nowhere else

\* Mr Carlyle does not credit this story, but it is fairly well authenticated.



could Pope have found his inspiration ; the atmosphere of a county town is fatal to them. Dumfries, at the close of last century, was by all accounts a bad type of its class : the majority of its industrious inhabitants found relief from the drudgery of their trades in the small gossip of their limited society ; the loungers went "black-guardin" through the streets, or rioting in taverns. In this headquarter of scandal and dissipation Burns' course was almost inevitably downwards. His whole history was a struggle between the loftiest aspirations, the most refined humanities, and temptations which his will was seldom strong enough to resist. During his last five years, his official duties compelled him constantly to ride in all weathers over moor and vale in search of illicit distilleries, and come into close contact with their contents. His genius opened to him the doors of castle and of cot ; in the latter he was exposed to rural hospitality, in the former to the demands of the company gathered to wonder at his wit and rejoice to find it flow freer with the wine. "They would not thank me," he said of the squires and lairds, "if I did not drink with them. I have to give them a slice of my constitution." Thousands of professing Christians, leading far worse lives, have found shelter in obscurity ; but when a great man yields it is proclaimed on the house-tops and cried in the market.

The early records of his residence are full of forebodings. His income was inadequate for his growing family, and he began to have reason to complain of the coldness of patrons. "The rock of independence," of which he was wont to talk, was overhung with clouds lit by the meteors of French Revolutionism. In Nov. 1791 he bitterly writes to Ainslie, "My wife scolds me, my business torments me, and my sins come staring me in the face." It is at this period that Clarinda again flashes with a vivid lustre across the scene. Their intermittent correspondence thickened, and, towards the close of November, he went to Edinburgh and spent a week mainly in her company. To their farewell meeting, on the 6th December, there are several fervent allusions. From Dumfries, on his return, we have on the 15th: "This is the sixth letter

that I have written since I left you, my ever beloved." Shortly after he sends the verses, "Ae fond kiss and then we sever," with the quatrain,

"Had we never loved sae kindly,  
Had we never loved sae blindly,  
Never met, or never parted,  
We had ne'er been broken hearted,"

which, quoted by Byron, admired by Carlyle and Mr Arnold, is the quintessence of passionate regret. More than a year elapsed during which Mrs M'Lehose had gone to the Indies, and, finding her husband surrounded by a troop of small mulattoes, had come back again. Then more letters passed, the final one preserved being from the poet, dated Castle Douglas, 25th June 1794, in which he professes to be perplexed as to the manner in which he is to address her; "the language of friendship will not suffice," &c. Then he reflects on the fickleness of fame; "she does not blow her trumpet now as she did." "Yet," he adds, "I am as proud as ever, and wish in my grave to be stretched to my full length, that I may occupy every inch of ground I have a right to." Here—not in the rendezvous of March 1788—closes the episode of Clarinda, unless we bring together two later references that originally lay far apart. One is from a letter of the poet to Mary Peacock, the friend in whose house the lovers first met, of date 6th December 1792. "This eventful day recalls to my memory such a scene. Heaven and earth, when I remember a far distant person." Then he gives the song

"Ance mair I hail thee thou gloomy December,"  
"Parting wi' Nancy, Oh, ne'er to meet mair."

The other is found in a leaf of an old woman's diary of 1831 on the same anniversary, "This day I can never forget. Parted with Burns in the year 1791 (forty years ago) never more to meet in this world. O, may we meet in heaven!" *Μείζον ἢ κατὰ δάκρυα.* The writer survived till 1841, reaching the age of 82.

In Burns' miscellaneous correspondence of this period there is little of conspicuous interest. The early stage of his intimacy with Maria (wife of Walter Riddell of Woodley Park), a brilliant West Indian of nineteen, at whose house he was for two years a frequent guest, is marked by an introduction of her book to his Edinburgh printer. In September 1792, acknowledging to Alexander Cunningham a diploma conferred by the royal archers, he writes one of his half dozen most remarkable letters, brimming with banter like Falstaff's, then growing savage as Timon, in an attack on the "religious nonsense," which he declares to be "of all the most nonsensical," asking, "why has a religious turn of mind always a tendency to narrow and illiberalise the heart," and then putting the whole storm to rest by the exquisite verse inspired by Miss Lyndsay Baillie,

"The very deil he couldna' scathe  
 Whatever wad belang thee ;  
 He'd look into thy bonie face  
 And say, 'I canna wrang thee.'"

In the same month the Thomson correspondence begins, one of the poet's earliest contributions to their joint undertaking being "Ye banks and braes and streams around." The first volume was published in July 1793, and shortly afterwards came the refusal of remuneration. In March we have an interesting literary link in a letter to Miss Benson of York, afterwards Mrs Basil Montague, Carlyle's ill-requited patroness, and a request to the bailies of Dumfries to be made a freeman of the town, the granting of which enabled his sons to be well educated in the grammar school at small expense. In April 1793 an exuberant humour overflows in his last letter to his old friend Ainslie, signed Spunkie, with a notable satire on pedants, who are advised to go about with bundles of books bound to their backs. Towards the close of the year he writes, to Mrs Dunlop, of Cowper's 'Task' "a glorious poem, bating a few scraps of Calvinistic divinity, it has the religion which ennobles man."

The subject of Burns's Religion might lead us into

deeps beyond the range of the Satires, and supply material for a distinct chapter. His views, seldom clearly formulated, are not always consistent; within limits they vary with varying moods: but they are in the main those of an anxious sceptic, as opposed to either extreme of positive or negative dogmatism. His prevailing reverence in treating sacred subjects has been justly admired: but, while his light words have been gathered up against him, the extent to which he deliberately departed from the "Orthodoxy" of the mass of his countrymen has been studiously slurred over. Burns knew his Bible well, and made frequent use of it; but we have no reason to believe that, after manhood, he ever read it otherwise than, as a great modern critic has told us to read it, "like any other book." "This letter," cries his most recent biographer, "seems to savour of Socinianism." The word, often used in Scotland to conjure up the devil of intolerance, is equally applicable to almost all the leading writers of the eighteenth century; the only conspicuous exceptions being Cowper and Johnson. Burns was, as far as he had realised to himself his own position, a Deist, and held that the mission of Christ was to redeem man from himself, rather than from any "wrath to come." "School-divinity," he in mockery exclaims, "raves abroad on all the winds." . . . "On earth discord! a gloomy heaven above, opening her jealous gates to the nineteen thousandth part of the tithe of mankind! and below an inescapable and inexorable hell, expanding its leviathan jaws for the vast residue of mortals. O doctrine, comfortable and healing to the weary wounded soul of man." On points yet more radical he gives an uncertain sound. *E.g.* "We know nothing, or next to nothing, of the substance and structure of our souls. . . . Are we a piece of machinery, or do those workings argue something within us above the trodden clod? I own myself partial to such proofs of those awful and important realities, a God that's made all things, man's immaterial and immortal nature." . . . "Can it be possible that when I resign this feverish being I shall still find myself in conscious existence? . . . If there is another life, 'tis only for the good.

Would to God I as firmly believed it, as I ardently wish it." . . . "All my fears and cares are of this world; if there is another, an honest man has nothing to fear from it. Every fair, unprejudiced enquirer must in such degree be a sceptic. As for immortality, we want data to go upon. One thing frightens me much, that we are to live forever seems too good news to be true." "If there be a life beyond the grave, which I trust there is, and if there be a good God presiding over nature, which I am sure there is, thou (Fergusson) art now enjoying existence in a glorious world."

"Tell us ye dead,  
Will none of you in pity disclose the secret  
What 'tis you are and we must shortly be."

A thousand times I have made this apostrophe to the departed sons of men, but not one of them has ever thought fit to answer the question. O that some courteous ghost would blab it out. It cannot be. You and I, my friend, must make the experiment by ourselves, and for ourselves."

Stretching out his arms to these vast voids, crying aloud in the wilderness, beating at the bars of the iron gates, Burns had no care to pose as a protagonist about a disputed text, or to ride the whirlwind of a tea-cup storm over an antiquated ceremonial. His clear, strong mind—none clearer or stronger of his age or nation—tore right through those comparatively trivial counterscarps of discussion, and battered about the citadel; raising the questions of the existence of a beneficent, omnipotent Being, and the hopes of a future life. On the last he is tossed, like a ship at sea: on the first he seems to find an anchor. His ethical standard is, in prose and verse alike, explicit. "Whatever mitigates the woes or increases the happiness of others, this is my criterion of goodness, and whatever injures society at large, or any individual in it" (in which category he is careful to include the whole animal creation), "this is my measure of iniquity." Again, "Of all the qualities we assign to the author and director of Nature, by far the most enviable is to be able to wipe away all tears from all eyes. What

sordid wretches are they who go to their magnificent mausoleums with hardly the consciousness of having made one poor honest heart happy." Burns's Creed is that of Pope's "Universal Prayer;" his Religion is condensed in the couplet—

"The heart benevolent and kind  
The most resembles God."

His Millennium was no miraculous cataclysm, no late fulfilment of the wonderful old dream of deliverance from Nero, but the realisation of the slowly dawning golden age—

"When man to man the world o'er  
Shall brithers be for a' that."

The poet's literary activity during these years was, with the exception of a few prologues and epigrams, restricted to his songs, which he continued to pour forth as from a well of living waters. He had planned a long poem on a legend of the Bruce, but never found himself in a vein or at leisure to accomplish it; fortunately so, had it led him to blank verse, in which he always failed. To the years 1792, 1793, belong, among others, the lyrics, "The Deil's awa' wi' the Exciseman," "O saw ye bonnie Leslie," "Gala Water," "Poortith Cauld," "Lord Gregory," and "Scots wha hae," the last inspired in the course of an excursion to Galloway with Mr Syme—a friendly stamp collector, who occupied the ground floor of the house in Bank Street. The following year gave birth to "The Minstrel of Lincluden" expanded into "The Vision," beginning, "As I stood by yon roofless tower" (for there are two poems of the same name), "My Love is like a red, red Rose," "It was a' for our rightful King,"\* which, if it be Burns', is his noblest contribution to Jacobite minstrelsy, and about the same date—passing from pole to pole of politics—the Ode on Washington's birthday. In the interval, the family, increased (November 21st, 1792) by the addition of a daughter (who died in the autumn of 1795), had removed to their second

\* This poem, with the exception of one verse in the ballad of Molly Stewart, never seems to have been heard of before its appearance in Johnson's Museum.

and larger Dumfries residence, a self-contained house in the Mill Vennel, in which were born the fourth son, James Glencairn (1794), and the fifth, Maxwell, who came into the world on the day and at the hour of his father's funeral. Meanwhile during these years the poet had twice got into trouble, owing to an amiable indiscretion in the first instance; in the second to a misdemeanour.

Burns' politics are on the surface somewhat puzzling. He was a Jacobite and a Jacobin, not in succession but simultaneously, and attempts have been made to reconcile the apparent contradiction by asserting that he was not much in earnest on either side. This view, based on a note to one of his songs, "except when my passions were heated . . . my Jacobitism was merely by way of *vive la bagatelle*," is adopted by Scott; and Alexander Smith denies the genuineness of both political sentiments, saying the one sprung from his imagination, the other from his discontent. The poet's own apologetic expression, however, loses its force when we remember that most of his best work was due to passion; and his commentators forget that Burns could only write well on matters on which his heart was set. He had only contempt for the squabbles and corruptions of a county election where "lobster-coated-puppies" were ranged against well-to-do-tradesmen, with their ragged regiments hooting at each other across the street: hence his ballads, &c., on all local and practical affairs might well be dispensed with. His arrows only stuck when they came from a bow at full tension; his bullets only hit the mark when, as in the German fable, they had been dipped in the huntsman's blood. No doubt modern Jacobitism, like devotion to anything that is past, must draw largely on the feelings, and the spirit of Jacobinism is whetted by a sense of injustice. But Burns has written too much and too well of both to permit his regard for either to be set down to a love of "fine phrases." Verses like these—

"Great Dundee who smiling victory led,  
And fell a martyr in her arms."

. . . . .

“ Bold Scrimgeour fellows, gallant Graham,  
 Auld Covenanters shiver ;  
 Forgive ! forgive ! much wronged Montrose  
 Now death and hell engulf thy foes ; ”

those with the refrain, “ There’ll never be peace till Jamie comes hame,” and (if it was his), “ Now a’ is done that man can do,” are no more the outcome of shallow sentiment than “ Let us pray that come it may,” is of personal pique. “ Politics are not Poetry,” said Goethe, and wrapped in his own classic art, and the problems of all time, wrote at his Meister and Xenien with the echoes of Jena about his ears. But Goethe was a man apart ; his maxim expresses only a half truth ; it may suffice for calm philosophers, or the gilt gingerbread of sickly sentimentalism, but poets who are men of like though fiercer passions than their race, the class whose souls are “ fiery particles,” will be fervid politicians, but of a peculiar, and as regards their immediate surroundings, perhaps a useless kind. It is of the essence of poetry to attach itself to commanding Personalities, to Romance and to Ideals. The practical government of compromising parties has not elicited a single verse worth reading. The poet looks over the heads of Whig and Tory to legends of the setting, or promises of the rising sun, he celebrates Arthur and Barbarossa, or he heralds the millennium of Shelley, or he falls, as Byron did before he enrolled among the Carbonari, at the feet of a Napoleon. By dint of a sham audacity, even the sanguinary charlatan who travestied the last, has enlisted the homage of our greatest poetess. Over the house of Brunswick it has never been found possible to be poetically enthusiastic. The very countenances of the Georges were enough to gorgonise the Muses. In all the arts they deliberately patronised mediocrity and neglected genius. The great minister of the first and second, Sir Robert Walpole, “ the poet’s foe,” grew dunces faster than Pope could slay them. The great minister of the third, the elder Pitt, was, during the noblest part of his career, practically at war with his sovereign,—the obstinate farmer whose policy had lost to us one continent and embroiled us with another. The King



was a more hopeless theme for song than his son, the fribble, in training to become "the first gentleman in Europe." The poet's letters, whether of defiance or apology, public or private, to the *Star* newspaper or to Mrs Dunlop, are full of hardly-suppressed disgust at the self-complacent "reign of Heavenly Hanoverianism." No wonder his fancy reverted to the Stuarts, whose names from that of their glory, the first James,—the great King and good poet whose assassination retarded for a hundred years the civilisation of his country,—to that of their shame, the sixth, had been indissolubly linked with minstrelsy and chivalrous adventure. The ill-starred enterprizes of the exiled race, appealing at once to the poetic sympathy with fallen greatness and the poetic love of tradition, gave birth to the host of stirring or pathetic ballads on which Burns fed. He grants that the issue tried at Culloden was decided well, but it does not hinder him from weeping with the Highland widow over her slain sons; he theoretically admits that "Sacred Freedom's cause" was that of the Covenanters, but he passes over the martyrs of Episcopacy to celebrate "our greatly injured lovely Scottish Queen," and echo the charge of the Græme at Killiecrankie.

The same temperament which led him to dwell on commanding Personalities and Romance in the past, also led him to look with favour on the imposing figures and aspirations that seemed, in the present, to hold out hopes for the future. Various estimates have been made as to the extent to which the revolution in English verse that marked the close of the century was affected by French politics; but there is no doubt they had points of contact and affinity; nor was it possible that Burns should have remained callous to a movement to which in his "green unknowing youth," even Wordsworth designed to offer his aid. He settled in Dumfries about the date of Mirabeau's death; when the most moderate liberals still looked with favour on the uprising of a people against centuries of misrule. Somewhat later Jemappes was still regarded as a triumph of defensive warfare, and twelve months more elapsed before Danton had

flung down the head of a king as his gage, and Burke had taken it up in his paroxysms against the regicides. It is hard for us after ninety years of disenchanting history to realize the fascination of "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity," before the reign of terror had shown the dangers of the first, and experience the unreality of the second. Burns was not slow to manifest and even to parade his sympathies. Towards the close of February 1792, we are told that he seized a smuggling craft, bought four of her guns,\* and sent them as a present to the National Assembly, and that, on their being intercepted, the incident, with others, as his proposing the health of George Washington, at a banquet, went against him. In any case, rumours got abroad that he not only held but had freely expressed revolutionary opinions. The Government of the day was nervous and alert, remembering Wilkes, alarmed by Paine and the "Friends of the People," they did not hesitate to employ spies, and were ready to accept "delations" of "the suspect." The Board of Excise, with or without instigation, ordered an inquiry to be made into the conduct of their gauger: hearing of which he, anticipating dismissal, sent off an excited letter to Mr Graham, giving the lie direct to the allegations against him. This was followed by another, January 1793, somewhat calmer in tone, but going into painful details of exculpation, and profuse in professions of loyalty to the "sacred key-stone" of our constitution, the king. As far as pains and penalties went the storm blew over, but hope of promotion was at an end, and Burns felt that he had been through the Valley of Humiliation, no salutary discipline for a soul like his, and had to submit to an insolent reprimand. "Mr Corbet," he writes, in a letter to his generous champion, Erskine of Mar, "was instructed to enquire on the spot, and to document me that my business was to act, *not to think*, and that whatever might be men or measures it was for me to be silent and obedient." Incredible as it may appear, this *ne plus ultra* of Bumbledom has been recently defended

\* This has been by some dogmatically denied, but the incident is unlikely to have been invented.

on the ground that the poet, being "in the public employ," had no right "to dabble in politics," *i.e.*, he was to be debarred from expressing his regard for two republics, with both of which we were at peace, because the Tories happened to be then in power. Burns was bound, with all good citizens, to abstain from seditious courses, but his office held, we take it, "*aut vitam aut culpam*," could not bind him always to agree with the Ministry, nor had he sold his soul and body, or his liberty of speech, for £70 a-year. He ran the risk of every candidate for patronage in offending his possible patrons, but the censure of the Board was an impertinence, and that he felt it to be so the noble close of the letter to Erskine, in which we have the best account of the matter, clearly demonstrates. After this business the poet's first resolve was to hold his peace, "I jouk and let the jaw gie o'er:" but he chafed under his chains, and sometimes made a noise in rattling them. To use his own image, he felt sore, like Æsop's lion under an ass's kick. During the spring '93, the bitterness breaks out in occasional letters, notably in his answer to the admonitions of the now respectable Nicol and the recently published Political Catechism—addressed to Cunningham—items of which have naturally attracted attention. The writer of this and the nearly contemporaneous lines, "You're welcome to despots, Dumouriez," must have ceased to expect anything from Pitt or Dundas. It is the clenching sarcasm of a man smarting under the sense of neglect, and sick of hope deferred, whose fair-weather friends were treating him as popular people treat everyone under a cloud. Suspected politics, added to doubtful religion, were too much to bear, and they looked black upon him and fought shy of him. To be thought bad is apt to make a man bad: to be excluded from the society of equals is to be driven to that of inferiors. Fatigue and despondency alternating with fits of restless irritation, Burns, too much impressed with the maxim, "Better be the head of the commonalty than the tail of the gentry," sought relief among the lower ranks, where he found a shallow sympathy and countenance in his now besetting sin. "Occasional

hard drinking," he writes to Mrs Dunlop, "is the devil to me. Against this I have again and again bent my resolution, and have greatly succeeded. Taverns I have totally abandoned: it is the private parties among the hard-drinking gentlemen . . . that do me the mischief." On the morning after this letter was written, when the Rev. Mr McMorline came to baptise his child, he found that Burns had never been in bed, having sat up all night in his own house, with some boon companions.

The next year, 1794, opened with a course of indulgence that twice proved disastrous. On the first occasion, having proposed a toast, "May our success in the war" (the early stages of which he always condemned) "be equal to the justice of our cause," in presence of a fire-eating officer, he narrowly escaped being dragged into a duel. The name of this "lobster" is preserved by the fact of his encounter with the poet, to whom, when the French really became aggressive, it fell to write the most stirring of our challenges of defence. "Does haughty Gaul invasion threat" will survive Captain Dods. On the second occasion, in consequence of his joining in a freak with other over-heated guests, coming from the dinner-table to Maria Riddell's drawing-room, he lost for a time the esteem of her family, and, what was of more moment, of herself. Kissing, which "goes by favour," should never be public, and her indignation, aggravated, it may be, by a latent sense of the disparity of their ranks, was proportioned to her affection for the man to whose genius she has left the finest contemporary tribute. Next morning the poet, duly contrite, addressed the lady in cries of prose and verse that might have melted a stone, but she remaining obdurate, Burns, who could never brook repulse, suddenly passed from apology to lampoon. This completed the alienation, and made him regarded as beyond the pale, a "*mauvais sujet*," with whom there was no dealing. The quarrel was ultimately made up, but not before his friend, the Laird of Carse, unfortunately involved in it, had died and been lamented in the elegy, "No more ye warblers of the wood." The only remaining event of the year worth recording is a visit

from his old acquaintance, Josiah Walker, whose sententious comments on the occasion afterwards roused the wrath of Christopher North. Nor is there much in the next, but the gathering of the clouds on the entrance to the Valley of the Shadow. Care, remorse, and embarrassment had done their work in undermining a strong constitution. "What a transient business is life," he writes (January 1) to Mrs Dunlop, "very lately I was a boy; but t'other day I was a young man, and I already begin to feel the frigid pulse and stiff joints of old age coming fast over my frame." Walking with a friend who proposed to him to join a county ball, he shook his head, saying, "that's all over now," and adding the oft-quoted verse of Lady Grissel Baillie. His prevailing sentiment was that of his own couplet, characterised as the concentration of many night-thoughts—

"The pale moon is setting beyond the white wave  
And Time is setting wi' me O."

Yet, ever and anon, his vitality re-asserted itself, and out of the mirk there flashed the immortal democratic creed—

"Is there for honest poverty  
That hangs his head and a' that?"

In March we have a glint of sunshine; he was reconciled to Maria, again received her letters, criticised her verses, and took heart to make a last appeal to Mr Heron for promotion. In September, the death of his daughter again broke his spirit and accelerated the close. His hand shook, his pulse and appetite failed, and he sunk into an almost uniform gloom: but to the last it was lit with silver streaks. From the very Castle of Despair he wrote, "Contented wi' little and canty wi' mair:" over the dark surface of the rising waters there ripples the music of the lines—

"Their groves o' sweet myrtle let foreign lands reckon,  
While bright beaming summers exalt the perfume,  
Far dearer to me yon lone glen o' green breckan,  
With the burn stealing under the lang yellow broom."

In January 1796, the poet, on his return from a gathering at the *Globe*, fell asleep in the open air and caught a chill,

developing into a rheumatic fever, with which he was during the early months intermittently prostrate. On his partial recovery, in April he wrote to Thomson, "I fear it will be some time before I tune my lyre again. By Babel's streams I have sat and wept. I have only known existence by the pressure of sickness, and counted time by the repercussions of pain. I close my eyes in misery, and open them without hope. I look on the vernal day, and say with poor Fergusson—

"Say wherefore has an all-indulgent heaven  
Life to the comfortless and wretched given."

May was a month of unusual brightness, but cutting east winds went against him, and, though sometimes appearing in the streets, he was so emaciated as hardly to be recognised. His wife being from her condition unable to attend to him, her place was supplied by the affectionate tenderness of Jessie Lewars, who hovered about his couch, like the "little fairy," who long afterwards ministered to the dying hours of the matchless German lyrist, Heinrich Heine. To this girl, the sister of a fellow exciseman, Burns addressed two of his latest and sweetest songs with the stanzas—

"Here's a health to ane I lo'e dear,  
Thou art sweet as the smile when fond lovers meet,  
And sweet as their parting tear, Jessie."

. . . . .  
"O wert thou in the cauld blast  
On yonder lea, on yonder lea,  
My plaidie to the angry airt  
I'd shelter thee, I'd shelter thee."

The poet himself was rapidly passing beyond the need of shelter. On July 4th, he was sent for sea air to a watering-place, Brow on the Solway, and there had a last meeting with Mrs Riddell, saluting her with the question, "Well, madam, have you any commands for the other world?" He spoke without fear of the approaching close, but expressed anxiety for his wife and children, and the possible injury to his fame from the publication of unguarded letters and

verses. "He lamented," we quote from the lady, "that he had written many epigrams on persons against whom he entertained no enmity, and many indifferent poetical pieces which he feared would be thrust upon the world. . . . The conversation was kept up with great evenness and animation on his side. . . . I had seldom seen his mind greater or more collected." On the 10th, when his landlady wished to let down the blinds against the dazzling of the sun, Burns exclaimed, "O let him shine, he will not shine long for me." His peace of mind was unhappily distracted by the inadequacy of the allowance granted to officers on leave for illness, and by a letter inopportunately arriving from a Dumfries tradesman pressing for the payment of an account. This drew forth two piteous appeals—one to Thomson, the other to his cousin at Montrose—for the loan of small sums to save him "from the horrors of a jail:" with the former he enclosed his last lyrical fragment, "Fairest maid on Devon Banks." The same day he addressed Mrs Dunlop complaining of her long silence, she too having been influenced by the "fama" of the preceding year. On the 14th, he announced to Jean his arrival on the 18th. When brought home he was so weak that he could not stand; but he was able to send to his father-in-law his last written lines saying, "Do, for Heaven's sake, send Mrs Armour here immediately." From the 19th to the end he was for the most part speechless, "scarcely himsel' for half-an-hour together," said Mrs Burns afterwards. At one time he was found sitting in a corner of the room, and, on being put back to bed, exclaimed, "Gilbert, Gilbert." Early on the 21st he was in deep delirium, broken only by a few sentences, among them a last flash of humour to an attendant volunteer, "John, don't let the awkward squad fire over me."

The practice of lingering over the death-beds of great men to peer and moralize is apt to be either foolish or impertinent. The last utterances of Madame Roland, Goethe, or Byron may be memorable; but we can draw no conclusion as to their lives, or the truth of their views of life, from the despairing agonies of Cowper, the celestial vision of Pope, or

the serene composure of Hume. The last moments of Burns were stormy, as his life; an execration on the agent who had sent him the dunning account—and the mighty Spirit passed. On the 25th, his remains were carried through Dumfries amid throngs of people asking, “Who will be our poet now?” and buried with local honours. Shortly after the turf had been laid on the mortal vesture of the immortal power, a young lady with an attendant climbed at nightfall over the kirk-yard stile, and strewed the grave with laurel leaves. It was Maria Riddell who had forgotten his epigrams and still adored his memory. Burns died poor, but scarcely in debt, owing but a few pounds to his friendly landlord, whose only fault with him was that he did not have enough of his company. A subscription started for his family soon raised for their relief the sum of £700, which enabled them to preserve intact his little library and tide over evil days. The poet had a hard struggle for bread, but a tithe of the stones of his monuments would have kept himself and his in affluence through all their lives. Scotland has had sweet singers since his death, one of them (Tannahill) with almost as tuneful a voice in rendering the beauties of external nature; but only two great writers—Scott and Carlyle. Neither combined his lurid and passionate force with the power of musical expression. In these respects his only heir was the future lord of English verse, the boy who was about to leave the shadows of Lach-na-gair for the groves of Newstead.

### III.—RETROSPECT AND SUMMARY.

If the purpose of these records of the poet has been in any degree fulfilled, there is little need to ask further what manner of man he was, or to add a sermon to the half-triumphant, half-tragic text: triumphant in that it was given him to mature his faculties and achieve enduring work, tragic in that, thinking of his own often defeated struggle, he wrote “There is not among the martyrologies so rueful a



narrative." Reticence is rarely, if ever, found in conjunction with genius. Even Shakespeare "unlocked his heart" in the sonnets, and Goethe in the "Dichtung und Wahrheit." But Burns is garrulous to excess; least of all great writers, less than his nearest mate, Byron (who burns blue lights within otherwise transparent windows), did he or could he hide himself. He parades "the secrets of his prison house," joins a carnival unmasked, and with an approach to indelicacy throws open his chamber door. "I was drunk last night, this forenoon I was polygamic, this evening I am sick and sorry," is the refrain of his confession. Scotch to the core in his perfervid heart, he wears it on his sleeve to be pecked at by innumerable daws, and is, in this respect,—*teste* Thomas Campbell,—"the most un-Scotch-like of Scotchmen." On the other hand, he had all the ambition often unhappily characteristic of his race. "Fate," he exclaims, "had cast my station in the veriest shades of life, but never did a heart pant more ardently than mine to be distinguished." His youthful pride was, by his own account, apt to degenerate into "envy." His career was haunted by a suspicion of being patronised or insulted by rank or wealth, which led him too willingly to associate with his inferiors and to court the company of the wild "merry" rather than the sober "grave." "Calculative creatures" he condemns as inhumane; for errors of impulse he has superabundant charity; he has "courted the acquaintance of blackguards, and though disgraced by follies" has "often found among them the noblest virtues." Burns' affection for the waifs and strays of mankind, was the right side of the temperament of which his own recklessness was the wrong. But his practical sense, on occasion, asserted itself, in a manner worthy of the canniest Scot, *e.g.*, his refusal to stand surety for his brother, his determination never to bring up his sons to any learned profession, all his correspondence with Gilbert and Creech. Burns is at his worst, where he is cautious, almost cunning, as in some of the Clarinda letters, a few relating to the Armours, and such passages as that on his return from the West Highland tour where he talks of

women, as a fowler might do of his game. "Miss —— flew off in a tangent, like a mounting lark. But I am an old hawk at the sport and wrote her such a cool deliberate prudent reply as brought my bird from her aerial towerings, pop down at my feet like Corporal Trim's hat." Similarly in his toast of "Mrs Mac," at Dumfries dinners, his want of reserve amounts almost to a want of fine feeling, and justifies the censure that if woman, as a cynic has said, constituted the poet's religion, he ought to have dealt with it more reverently. Equally difficult is it to condone some of his vindictive epigrams. "Judex damnatur," who can ignore those aberrations of "Ayrshire's tutelary saint." The rest of the tragedy, "half within and half without," is the commonplace of moralizing commentary—that of hot blood, weak will, and straitened circumstances dragging down an eagle's flight. When the devil's advocate has done his worst, "the dissonance is lost in the music of a great man's name." Tried in many ways he was never tempted to do or to think anything mean. The theme of his prevailing sincerity has been exhausted by a sharer of many of his mental, exempted from his physical, faults, Mr Carlyle. The "finesse" of the poet's flirtations is at least on the surface. His amiable over-estimates were genuine to the core. His magnanimity amounted to imprudence; his gratitude to all who ever did him kindness to idolatry. Generosity in almsgiving, a virtue though an easy one of the rich, impossible to the poor, was not accessible to Burns; but he had the harder virtue, rare in our scrambling world, of cordially recognizing and extolling the men whom he held to be his peers. His anxiety to push the sale of other people's books, as evinced in his letters to Duncan, Tait, and Creech about Grose, Mylne, and Mrs Riddell, is a reproach to an age when poets are animated by the spirit of monopolists. If he loved praise, he was lavish of it. His benevolence that overflowed the living world was, despite his polygamic heats, concentrated in the intense domesticity of a good brother and son, husband and father. His works have been

called *A manual of Independence*; and that his homage to the "Lord of the lion heart" is no word boast, is seen in his horror of debt, and almost fanatical dread of obligation: they are also models of a charity which goes far to cover his own, as he made it cover the sins of others. Everyone who knew Burns well in private life seems to have loved him; but he owed none of his popularity to complaisance. Nothing in his character is more conspicuous than the shining courage that feared neither false man nor false God, his intolerance of the compromises and impatience of the shifts which are the reproaches of his nation. Yet no man was ever more proud of his nationality. The excess of patriotism which led Fergusson to assail the Union and detest Dr Johnson passed on to Burns. Here and there his humour sees a little rant in it, as when he writes to Lord Buchan, "Your much loved Scotia about whom you make such a racket;" but his prevailing tone is that of his letter to Lord Eglinton, "I have all those prejudices. . . . There is scarcely anything to which I am so alive as the honour and welfare of old Scotia; and, as a poet, I have no higher enjoyment than singing her sons and daughters." Hence, perhaps, the provincialism of his themes, which Mr Arnold with his "damnable iteration" of "Scotch drink, Scotch religion, and Scotch manners" perversely confounds with provincialism of thought.\* Hence,

\* *W.* Introduction to Ward's "English Poets," p. xli. After the novel remark, "The real Burns is of course in his Scotch poems," Mr Arnold proceeds, "Let us boldly say that of much of this poetry, a poetry dealing perpetually with Scotch drink, Scotch religion, and Scotch manners, a Scotchman's estimate is apt to be personal. A Scotchman is used to this world of Scotch drink, Scotch religion, and Scotch manners; he has a tenderness for it; he meets its poet half way. In this tender mood he reads pieces like the *Holy Fair* or *Halloween*. But this world of Scotch drink, Scotch religion, and Scotch manners is against a poet, not for him, when it is not a partial countryman who reads him; for in itself, it is not a beautiful world, and no one can deny that it is of advantage to a poet to deal with a beautiful world. Burns's world of Scotch drink, Scotch religion, and Scotch manners, is often a harsh, a sordid, a repulsive world; even the world of his *Cottar's Saturday Night* is not a beautiful world." Thereon follow some pages of supercilious patronage of the poet who was, it seems, "a man of vigorous understanding, and (need I say?) a master of language,"

rather than from his more Catholic qualities, the exaggerated homage that his countrymen have paid to his name. The Continent champions the cosmopolite Byron, heavily handicapped by his rank, against England; Scotland has thrown a shield over the errors of her most splendid son, and, lance in rest, dares even her own pulpits to dethrone her "tutelary saint." Seldom has there been a stranger or a more wholesome superstition, for on the one hand Burns is the great censor of our besetting sins, on the other he has lifted our best aspirations to a height they never before attained. Puritans with a touch of poetry have dwelt on the undoubted fact that he "purified" our old songs. The commonplace criticism is correct, but so inadequate as to leave the impression that he was an inspired scavenger, whose function was to lengthen the skirts of Scotland's "high-kilted Muse," and clip her "raucle" tongue. His work was nobler, that of elevating and intensifying our northern imagination. He has touched the meanest animal shapes with Ithuriel's wand, and they have sprung up "proudly eminent." His volumes owe their popularity to their being an epitome of melodies, moods and memories that had belonged for centuries to the national life: but Burns has given them a new dignity, as well as a deeper pathos, by combining an ideal element with the fullest knowledge of common life and the shrewdest judgment on it. He is the unconscious heir of Barbour, distilling the spirit of the old poet's epic into a battle chant, and of Dunbar, as the caustic satirist, the thistle as well as the rose of his land. He is the conscious pupil of Ramsay, but he leaves his master to make a social protest and lead a literary revolt. Contrast the "Gentle Shepherd" with the "Jolly Beggars"—the one is a court pastoral, like a minuet of the ladies of Versailles on the sward of the Swiss village near and mockery of his admirers. If the critic's knowledge of Burns may be gauged by his belief that the *Holy Fair* is "met half way" in a mood of "tenderness" for "Scotch religion," his criticism is harmless; but in perpetually playing with paradoxes Mr Arnold runs the risk of spoiling his own "attic style"—the style of "a man of vigorous understanding, and (need I say?) a master of language."

the Trianon, the other is like the march of the Mœnads with Theroigne de Mericourt. Over all this masterpiece is poured "a flood of liquid harmony:" in the acme of the two-edged satire, aimed alike at laws and law-breakers, the graceless crew are raised above the level of gipsies, footpads, and rogues, and made, like Titans, to launch their thunders of rebellion against the world. Ramsay adds to the rough tunes and words of the ballads the refinement of the wits who, in the "Easy" and "Johnstone" Clubs, talked, over their cups, of Prior and Pope, Addison and Gay. Burns inspires them with a fervour that thrills the most wooden of his race. He has purified "John Anderson, my Joe," and brought it from the bothie to the "happy fireside elime:" but the following he has glorified:—

1. Semple (seventeenth century)—rudely—

"Should old acquaintance be forgot  
And never thought upon,  
The flames of love extinguished  
And freely past and gone,  
Is thy kind heart now grown so cold,  
In that loving breast of thine,  
That thou canst never once reflect  
On old langsyne."

2. Ramsay (eighteenth century)—classically—

"Methinks around us on each bough  
A thousand Cupids play,  
While through the groves I walk with you  
Each object makes me gay ;  
Since your return the sun and moon  
With brighter beams do shine,  
Streams murmur soft notes while they run  
As they did langsyne."

3. Burns—immortally—

"We twa ha'e run about the braes,  
And pou'd the gowans fine,  
But we've wandered mony a weary foot  
Sin' auld langsyne.  
We twa ha'e paid'd in the burn  
Frae morning sun till dine,  
But seas between us braid ha'e roar'd  
Sin' auld langsyne."

It is the humanity of this and the like that has made Burns pass into the breath of our nostrils. His "voice is on the rolling air;" his arrows in every Scottish heart from California to Cathay. He fed on the past literature of his country as Chaucer on the old fields of English thought, and

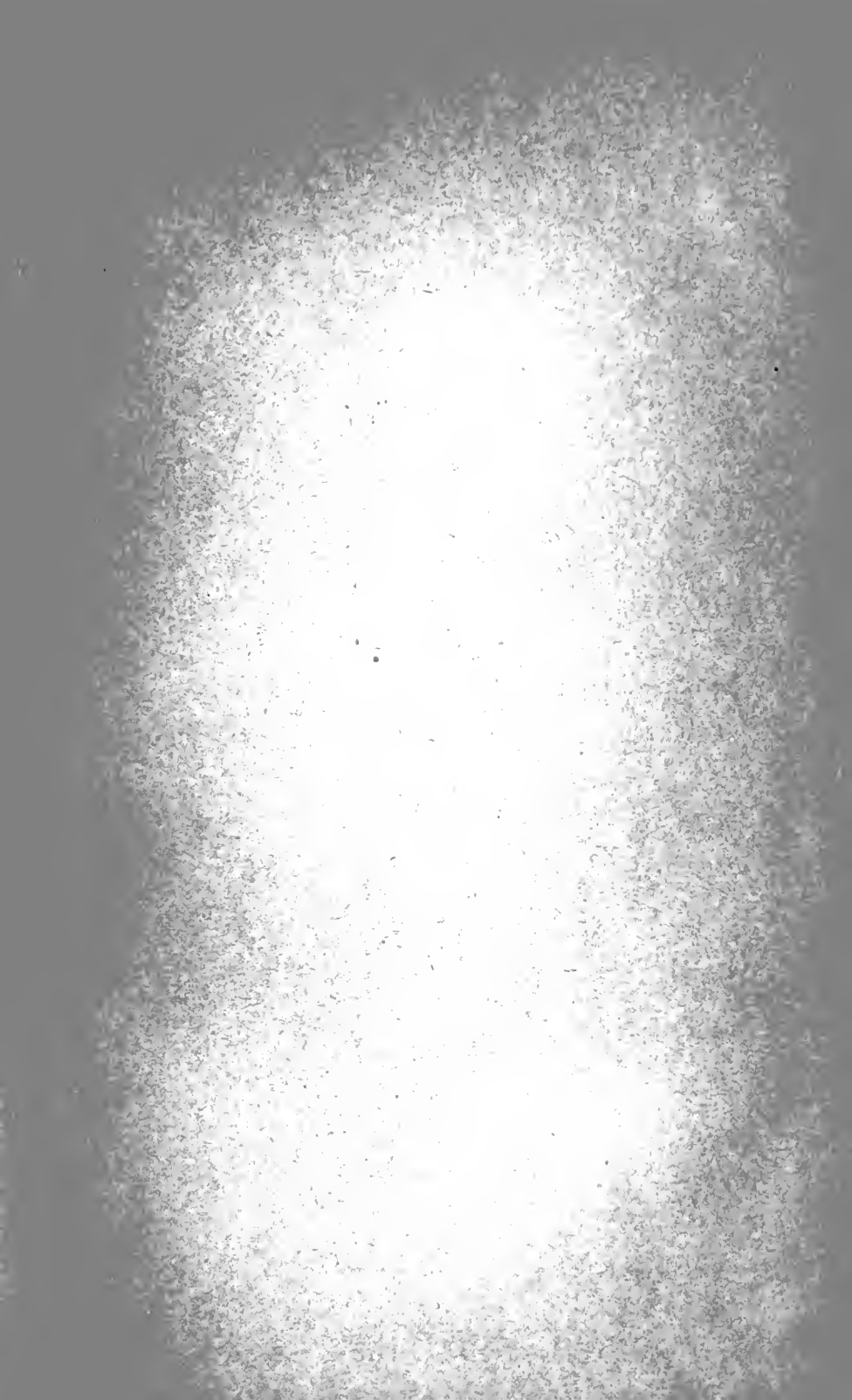
"Still the elements o' sang  
In formless jumble, richt and wrang,  
Went floating in his brain."

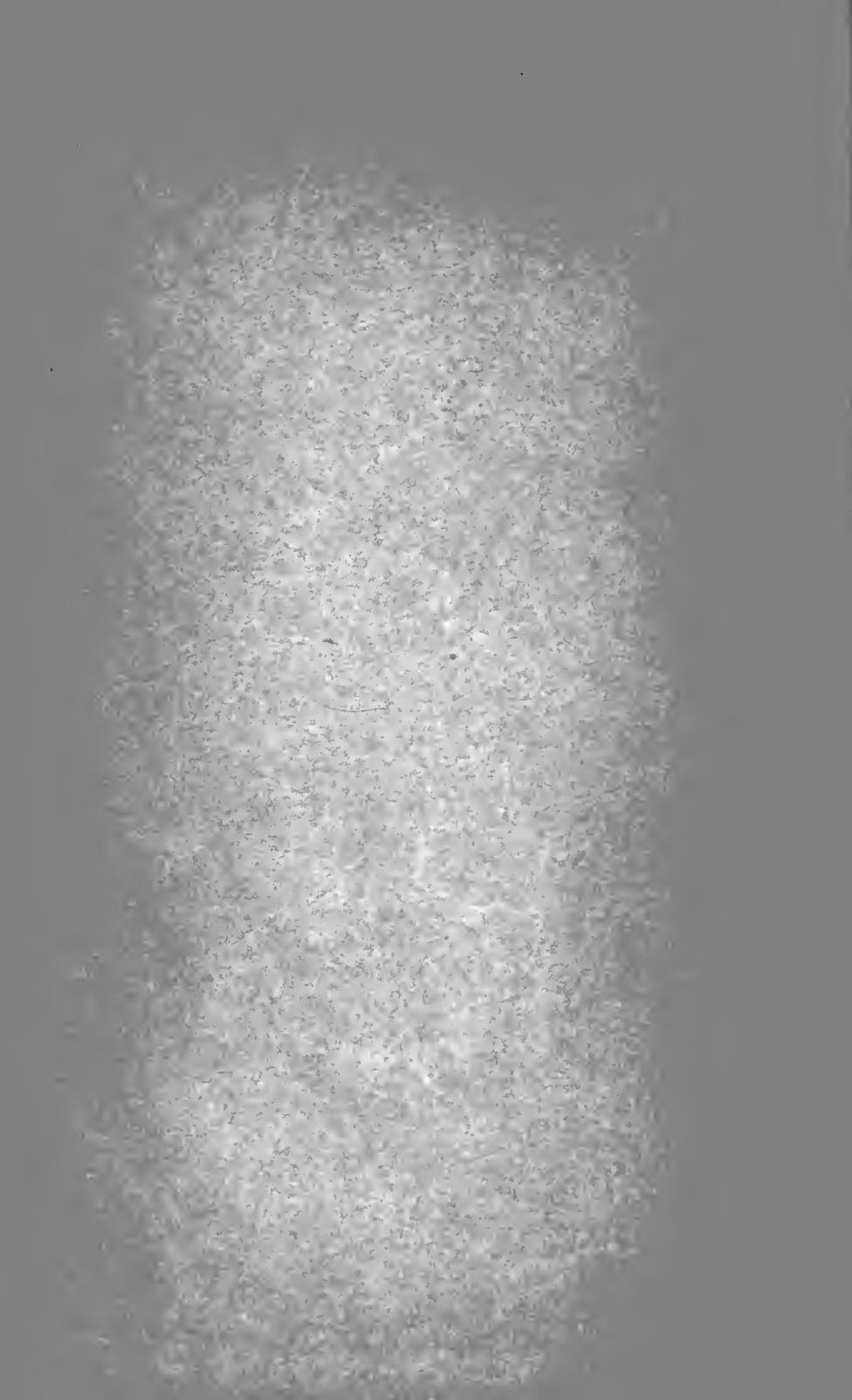
But, though as compared with Douglas, Lyndesay, &c., his great power was brevity, he brought forth an hundred-fold. First of the poets of his nation he struck the chord where Love and Passion and Reality meet. We had had enough of mere sentiment, enough of mere sense, enough of mere sensuality. He came to pass them through a harmonizing alembic. To this solid manhood, to this white heat, to the force of language which has made his words and phrases be compared to cannon balls, add the variety that stretches from "Scots wha hae" to "Mary in Heaven," from "Duncan Gray" to "Auld Lang Syne,"—a lyric distance only exceeded by the greater dramatic distance between Falstaff and Ariel, the Walpurgis Nacht and Iphigenia,—and we can understand the tardy fit of enthusiasm in which William Pitt compared Burns to Shakespeare. He who sings alike of Agincourt and Philippi, of Snug the joiner, and the "bank whereon the wild thyme blows," has doubtless no mate in the region of "Scotch drink, Scotch manners, Scotch religion;" but we have no such testimony to the cloud-compelling social genius of Shakespeare as everywhere meets us in regard to Burns. He walked among men as a god of either region. He had that glamour or fascination which, for want of a better word called electric, gave their influence to Irving, Chalmers, and Wilson, who have left little that is readable behind them. Carlyle alone among his successors,—representing the mixture of German idealism, John Knox morality, and the morbid spirit of our sad critical age—Carlyle alone among great Scotch writers,

seems to have had this power: but his thunderous prose wants the softness of his predecessor's verse. Swift, Gibbon, Hume, and Burns are, in our island, the greatest literary figures of the eighteenth; as Scott, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Byron are of the first half of the nineteenth century.











AA 000 599 603 8

